TANG JIU QING

BALLAD of SWORD & WINE 4

QIANG JIN JIU

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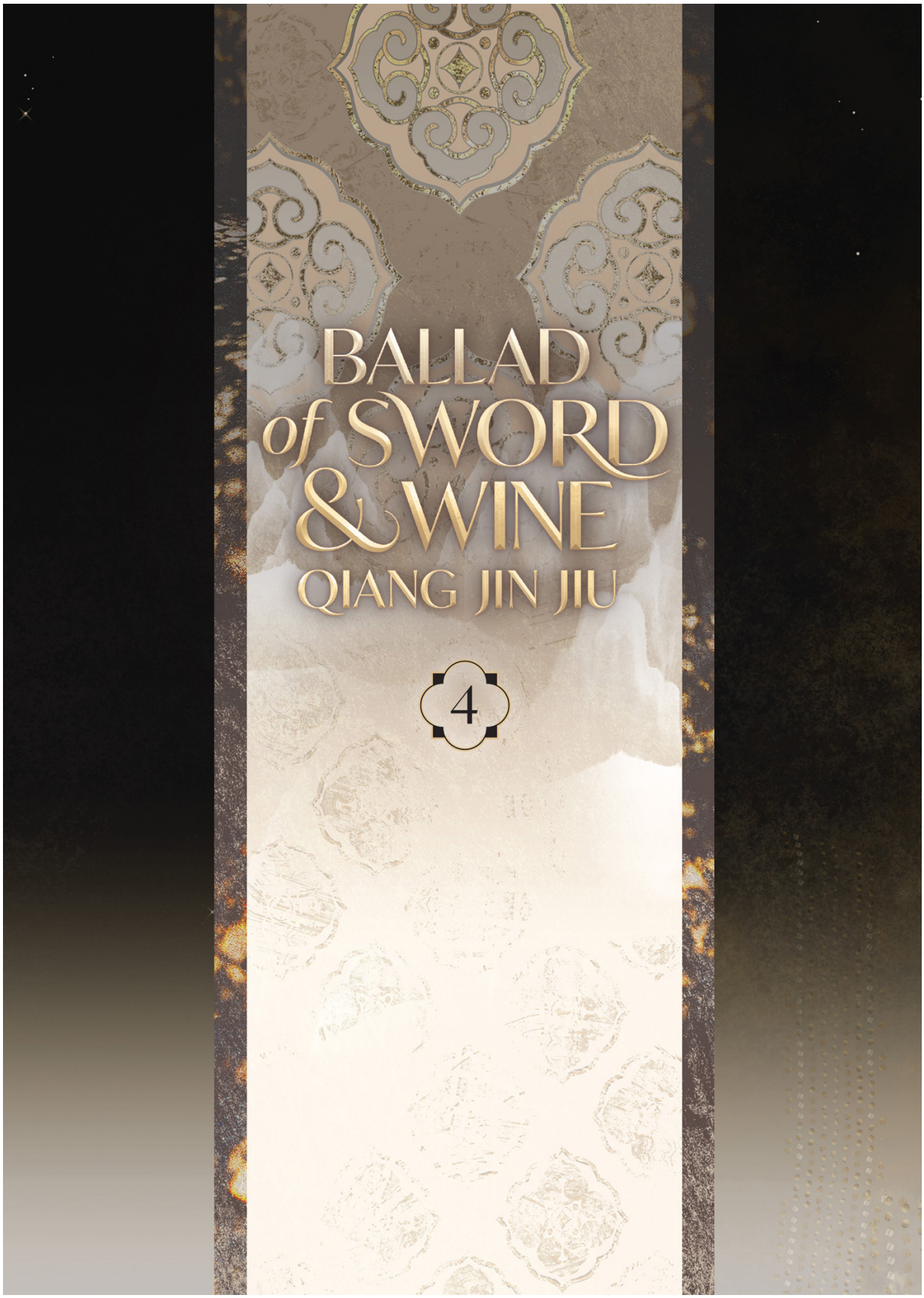
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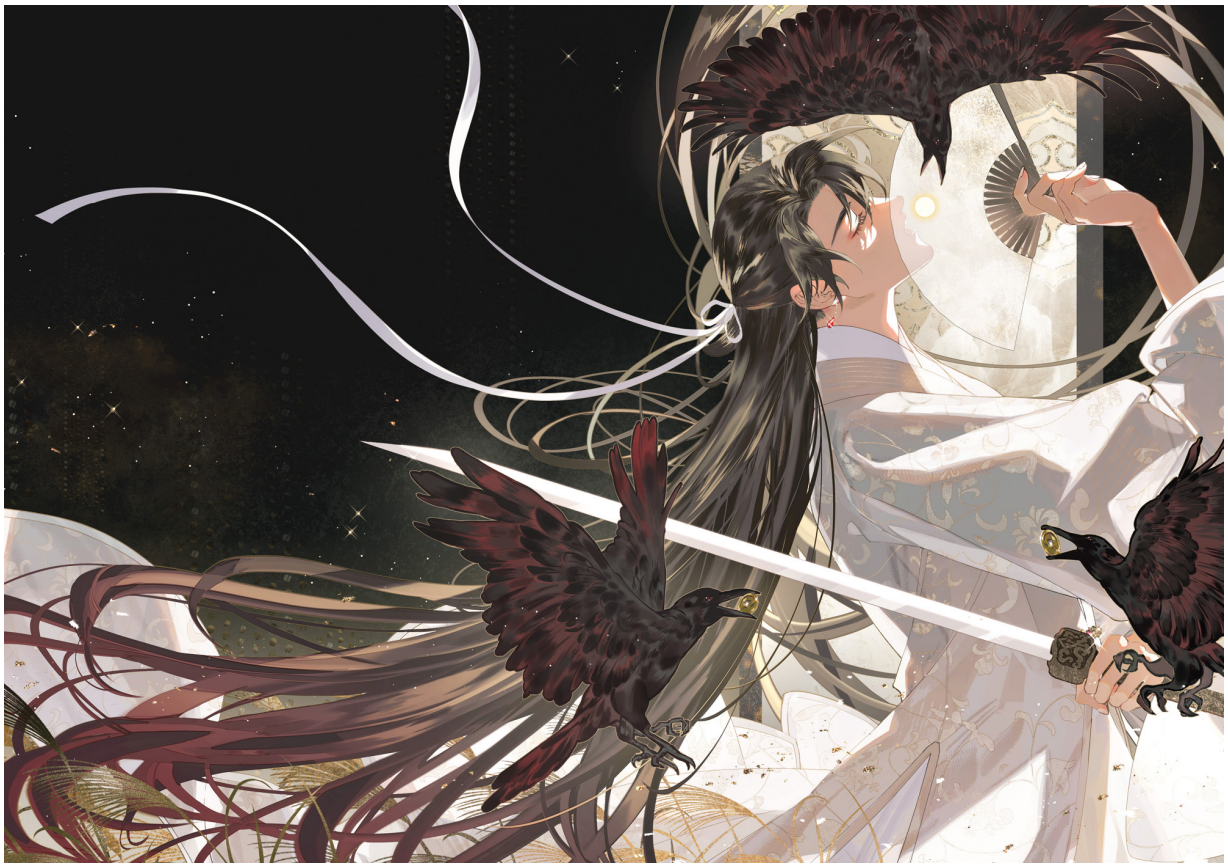

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BALLAD of SWORD & WINE

QIANG JIN JIU

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Chapter 113:
Reunion

IT WAS DAYLIGHT'S last hour. A few rays of evening sun lingered on the courtyard walls, diffused by the leaves of the pagoda trees. Ding Tao sat cross-legged on the veranda, keeping watch. He rolled some fruit around his silver plate, counting the pieces over and over again.

Shen Zechuan had just awoken. He had slept too long and too soundly, and felt almost more exhausted than when he'd lain down, his back sore and aching. He opened the door, blinking for a moment when he saw Ding Tao.

Ding Tao squirmed awkwardly under Shen Zechuan's gaze. Hiding the fruit in his hand behind his back, he asked apprehensively, "Gongzi—d-dinner?"

Shen Zechuan stood quietly for a spell, one hand on the doorframe for support, before croaking, "What time is it?"

"It's just now evening." Ding Tao was surprisingly astute today; he quickly added, "Gongzi slept the entire day! Master left the city at the crack of dawn. Lord Zhou and Mister Chengfeng went together to see him off."

The corners of Shen Zechuan's eyes were still tinged red; he was fair-skinned to begin with, and catching the last rosy glow of the evening sun, he looked flushed, as if he'd had too much wine. As he lowered his lashes to slip on his shoes, Ding Tao gaped at his beauty.

"Still no word from Juexi?" Shen Zechuan descended the steps, but he was in no hurry to leave. He stood under the pagoda tree and looked up at the sky, slowly recovering from the residual effects of last night's exertion.

"No." Ding Tao fell into step behind him. While Shen Zechuan was distracted, Ding Tao seized the opportunity to hastily stuff the uneaten half of his fruit into his mouth, gulping it down ravenously.

Shen Zechuan saw no sign of Meng; Xiao Chiye must have taken him along. He turned back, startling Ding Tao, who choked. After a moment, Shen Zechuan said, “No one will fight you for it. Take your time.”

Ding Tao was coughing so hard his eyes swam with tears. Waving a frantic hand, he tugged at the front of his clothes and said with difficulty, “G-Gongzi, *ack*! Are we going to see Lord Zhou? He and Mister Chengfeng already had dinner and are in the front hall discussing things now.”

Shen Zechuan nodded. “By all means.”

After taking his evening meal, Zhou Gui had convened in the study with Kong Ling and various other Cizhou officials. He rose at once upon hearing of Shen Zechuan’s arrival and dismissed the others.

“His Lordship informed us the vice commander was indisposed. We hadn’t intended to discuss any military matters until tomorrow. We weren’t expecting you’d be well enough to attend today,” Kong Ling said, hoping to alleviate any awkwardness as he showed Shen Zechuan to the seat of honor at the head of the room, facing the door. He returned to his place, angling his body to face Shen Zechuan and Zhou Gui, and continued, “Although we’re still in the hot sixth month, the trees in the residence are all tall with lush canopies; there’s not much direct sunlight, and it’s often brisk at night. Moving here after so many years in Qudu, the vice commander must be mindful of your health.”

Shen Zechuan took a sip of tea to moisten his throat. The hoarseness in his voice now a little less obvious, he said, “You’re right, of course. You mentioned we would discuss military matters tomorrow. Does that mean you’ve agreed on a plan for the garrison?”

“In the days since the vice commander signed a treaty of alliance with us, I’ve gathered my advisors alongside the various ranking officials of Cizhou and drafted a simple plan.” Hand on his knee, Zhou Gui watched as Kong Ling rose and passed a thin booklet to Shen Zechuan. “This is all tentative,” he continued. “We’ll still need the vice commander’s approval on the specifics. Take a look. If there’s anything amiss, let’s raise it for further discussion tonight.”

Although he had said they were waiting on Shen Zechuan's approval, *raise it for further discussion* meant most of the plans within the booklet had been finalized. Thus was the predicament in which Shen Zechuan found himself: He had money, but no practical authority; Xiao Chiye's deferential attitude toward Shen Zechuan was the only reason he had a seat at the table with these two. Zhou Gui could thank him and might even hold him in high esteem, but he would never hand over his authority to make policy in Cizhou—they had agreed on a treaty of alliance, not allegiance.

The room fell silent as Shen Zechuan read through the booklet. He had left Ding Tao outside teasing his sparrow; there were no servants nearby to disturb them. As Kong Ling sipped his tea, he was struck by a sense of unease. He maintained his composure and studied Shen Zechuan's expression, but could read nothing on his face. He glanced at Zhou Gui, whose knit brows gradually betrayed his mounting anxiety. He couldn't help but consider: Shen Zechuan might be young, but he was incredibly shrewd, and adept at keeping his thoughts to himself. After spending several days together, Kong Ling still couldn't gauge how he felt about their arrangement, and therefore had no idea how to respond. Drafting this book had partly been an attempt to sound him out.

By the time Shen Zechuan shut the book, the sun was gone. He rubbed his fingertips on the side of the teacup without saying a word.

Kong Ling also kept silent. He was merely the advisor; it wouldn't do to overstep his authority and bypass Zhou Gui during discussions of serious official affairs.

Zhou Gui asked Kong Ling to light the lamps, then turned to face Shen Zechuan head-on, deliberating over his next words. At last he said, "What does the vice commander think?"

"Your Excellency has precisely recorded the price fluctuations of the daily necessities of firewood, rice, oil, and salt in Cizhou over the past few years in this ledger; there'll be no problem estimating next year's expenditure. I can see you've also calculated the military pay and provisions that will need to be allocated for the garrison troops. With so many aspects to take into consideration, Your Excellency must have worked tirelessly," Shen Zechuan said with a smile.

Zhou Gui let out a light sigh of relief at those words; he didn’t know why he’d been so tightly wound to begin with. “This was not something I could prepare alone; I have Chengfeng and my fellow officials to thank for this. Then, shall we discuss the defense of the city walls?”

Shen Zechuan’s fingers stilled on the cup. “Not quite yet. I have some questions.”

“Please, go on,” Zhou Gui prompted him.

“Your Excellency has estimated Cizhou’s approximate expenditure for the next year. Other than the amount allocated for the new garrison troops, there is also a reparation of sixteen thousand dan[1] of grain owed to the twenty thousand heads of the Imperial Army, bringing the total sum for both armies to one hundred and ten thousand dan.” Shen Zechuan pondered. “This is a projection based on the yield from the bumper harvest in Cizhou last year and the grain consumption of Cizhou’s current populace. But I can see Your Excellency has left a remaining ten thousand dan of grains unallotted.”

“That’s right,” Zhou Gui answered.

Although Xiao Chiye said he didn’t require payment, it was impossible not to offer something. Sixteen thousand dan of grain would feed the twenty thousand soldiers of the Imperial Army for two and a half months at most, but it was more than the monthly amount they allocated to the twenty thousand Cizhou garrison troops. Though Cizhou was unable to supply a year’s worth of grain, they had truly done their utmost.

Worried Shen Zechuan found it too little, Zhou Gui said earnestly, “I’m showing Cizhou’s accounts to the vice commander today in the hope that the vice commander and the marquis will understand our predicament. Due to instability across the empire, our grain from last year has been successively allocated to Libei and to the bandits of Mount Luo, which we could never have foreseen. In past years, Juexi’s granaries were solely responsible for the supply of military provisions, but this responsibility is now split between the two prefectures of Cizhou and Huaizhou. I can’t speak for Huaizhou, but Cizhou had to scrimp and save in order to meet that quota. It’s not that I’m complaining to the vice commander, but the truth is

we’re gritting our teeth to feed His Lordship’s twenty thousand soldiers even temporarily. At this rate, there’ll be nothing left in the granaries in a couple months. Fortunately, we’re nearing the autumn harvest. Counting the days, we should just about make it until then; that’s the only reason we’re not yet desperate. I would like to ask the vice commander to intercede with His Lordship on behalf of Cizhou regarding this sixteen thousand dan of grain. It’s not that we want to go back on our words by providing it to him next year instead of now, but there’s really too much else to consider.”

Shen Zechuan did not immediately reply. The frown permanently etched between Zhou Gui’s brows deepened. He got to his feet and paced a few steps across the floor before he continued. “Cizhou is a place where the livelihood of its people is at the mercy of the elements. No one can say for sure if the heavens will be benevolent next year. Considering the current state of our empire, I fear that once war comes upon us, the fertile farmlands Cizhou has so recently cultivated will be trampled under soldiers’ boots. Should that time come, even the common folk of the city won’t be able to fill their stomachs; there will be nothing to feed a garrison even if we establish one. We set aside the military grain not only for a rainy day, but also in preparation for the needs of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Vice Commander, it’s not that we’re unwilling to give a bigger share to the marquis, but the Libei Armored Cavalry is the first line of defense against the Hanma tribe. It’s undeniable that they are strategically more important than the twenty thousand men of the Imperial Army.

“Half the reason Cizhou was willing to sign a treaty of alliance with my lords is that I was thoroughly heartbroken and disillusioned by the moldy grain sent to the front lines by the Wei Clan and their collaborators in the military provisions case. The fact that His Lordship the marquis is the second young master of the Xiao Clan has also dispelled many of my misgivings. This is a favor to my lords, but particularly to Heir Xiao. Although you’ve promised us the continued use of the Northeast Provisions Trail, I can’t depend on this. Juexi is the granary of the empire, after all; there is no doubt the various clans will fight to claim this supply route. The vice commander wants it—the empress dowager even more so.

“Everything I’ve said to the vice commander this evening is sincere; these words come from the bottom of my heart.” Zhou Gui paused, slowly bowing to Shen Zechuan as he continued, “It’s not easy to make a living when the world is in turmoil. As the prefect of Cizhou, the prefecture’s safety must be my first priority. His Lordship and the vice commander have helped Cizhou out of a tight spot, and for that, I won’t hesitate to go through fire and flood for you both. If Cizhou has another bumper harvest this year, we can add more to this sixteen thousand dan of grain for the Imperial Army’s allocation next year. But Cizhou simply can’t supply the Imperial Army the same way we’re supplying the Libei Armored Cavalry. I’ll be frank with you: If Biansha attacks again this autumn, or if Libei is hard-pressed for provisions come spring, then Cizhou will allocate the grain to the Libei Armored Cavalry before we allocate it to the Imperial Army.”

The candlelight in the study was dim. Zhou Gui lived frugally, dressing in simple clothes and eating simple fare. Other than on an occasion like the welcome feast he’d thrown for Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye, his family dined on common dishes. During the years in which the region was beset by natural disasters, they had boiled and eaten tree bark, just like anyone else. At the moment, Cizhou seemed prosperous in comparison to the rest in Zhongbo, but in truth, it was still a shambles compared to the empire’s other regions. Setting aside a portion of the city’s grain for these new arrivals was something they had done under a great deal of pressure. The first time Xiao Chiye left the city to face Lei Changming, Zhou Gui had brought up requesting the aid of the Libei Armored Cavalry. It hadn’t been a spur-of-the-moment suggestion, but a notion deeply ingrained in his mind.

The fall of Zhongbo had come up in their conversations countless times—both implied and stated outright—but outsiders would never understand how it had felt to live through it. Zhou Gui had developed a nervous disorder after the defeat. If he heard so much as a whistle at night, he would toss and turn for hours in a constant state of anxiety.

The losses along the Chashi River had been more than devastating. Massacre, *massacre*—this word echoed from Duanzhou all the way to Qudu. It had been on everyone’s lips in those terrible days. To Qudu, the

bloodbath had been merely a smudge of ink on a report from the front lines, but for Zhongbo, the loss of their homes and families had been all too real.

It was only thanks to the Libei Armored Cavalry that Cizhou managed a narrow escape. In the eyes of Zhou Gui—of everyone in Cizhou—the Libei Armored Cavalry was of far greater importance than the Imperial Army. Xiao Jiming had descended from the heavens with his godly troops, swooping to their rescue, and that Iron Horse on River Ice became their talisman against the certain death of the northern and eastern frontiers of the Zhou empire at the hands of the Biansha Horsemen. Lei Jingzhe had wanted to take Cizhou, but he hadn't intended to settle there long; he would have robbed Cizhou's granaries and immediately left to seek reward in Qudu. The ever-present possibility that Xiao Jiming would deploy his troops southward was the fear nipping at his heels.

Xiao Jiming was said to have taken badly ill from the tainted grain, but no one had seen him with their own eyes. Those who counted on him didn't dare to believe it, and those who feared him didn't dare to bet on it. The old senior officials under Hai Liangyi were all wary of Xiao Fangxu, but their juniors in the ranks were more wary of Xiao Jiming.

Silence reigned in the study. The candle flame flickered.

Shen Zechuan felt his back and waist aching. Traces of Xiao Chiye's bites still marked his collarbone, concealed beneath his clothes. Strangely enough, at such a serious moment, he suddenly remembered Xiao Chiye's sweat-soaked face, his strong arms, and his gasping kisses along Shen Zechuan's neck.

In all his considerations of Xiao Chiye, he'd never once considered him lesser than Xiao Jiming.

Shen Zechuan did not stay silent long; though his mind wandered, it was only for a moment. "I understand. Next year, Ce'an and I will return to you the exact amount of the grain lent to us when we arrived here."

The color drained from Zhou Gui's face. He rushed to explain, "Vice Commander, that's not what we—"

"The issue I wanted to bring to Your Excellency's attention is not that the amount of grain you've allocated to the Imperial Army is too little, but

that it’s too much.” Shen Zechuan motioned for Zhou Gui to sit, then continued his explanation. “The fact that Cizhou is willing to allocate such a significant amount of grain to the Imperial Army is proof of your sincerity. But as we mentioned earlier, the Imperial Army will only be relying on grain from Cizhou temporarily. In the future, the Imperial Army will supply its own military provisions and will not need to draw from Cizhou’s granary.”

Zhou Gui was aware of his own shortcomings and didn’t dare reply directly. He looked to Kong Ling. “Chengfeng oversaw the drafting of this booklet, so there are some matters he understands better than I. Chengfeng, please explain to the vice commander.”

Kong Ling got to his feet, keeping one hand on the back of the chair for support. Instead of explaining, he asked a question: “The vice commander is certain the Imperial Army will not lack for grain in the future. You also said the Northeast Provisions Trail will still be used as usual. In truth, we can think of no solution that would allow for this. Would the vice commander be so kind as to explain? Otherwise, we must insist the Imperial Army accept this grain.”

Shen Zechuan gently brushed the lid over the tea in his cup. “Before that, I wish to ask both of you—do you expect Cizhou to merely live off the land from now on?”

“Cizhou is limited by its geography,” Kong Ling replied. “If we don’t live off the land, how can we survive?”

“What I see is the exact opposite.” Shen Zechuan set down the teacup. “It’s true that Cizhou’s position wasn’t originally ideal. You have Libei to the north and Chazhou to the south. You’re obstructed by Dunzhou and Duanzhou to the east and restricted by Dancheng to the west. Cizhou didn’t dare, nor was it able to, move as it pleased. But that was when Cizhou was subordinate to Qudu. Now that you’ve established a connection with Libei, Dancheng can no longer rely on Qudu’s power and influence to force you to do its bidding. Meanwhile, Dunzhou is overrun with the bandits, and the honest folk who remain there will soon flee, leaving the place a hollow husk. When this happens, three of the walls enclosing

Cizhou will have collapsed. The remaining, Chazhou, is not an obstacle, but an opportunity."

Zhou Gui fidgeted in his seat, wanting to stand up again. Kneading away at his robe until the fabric under his palms was wrinkled, he began cautiously, "You mean…"

"Chazhou lies along a waterway that leads right to Hezhou. After the fall of Zhongbo, traveling merchants from Hezhou took advantage of the opportunity to peddle foodstuffs at exorbitant prices in Zhongbo, making quick and huge profits from bandits of all kinds. It would be a true shame if this route was only used to make someone *else* rich."

"But bandits run rampant in Chazhou too," Kong Ling pointed out, "and they have connections with the Yan Clan of Hezhou. They won't let us do business along that route for nothing." He grew more anxious as he spoke. "Besides, what have we to trade? Compared to Hezhou, Cizhou is a remote hinterland."

"Grain," Shen Zechuan said.

The moment he said it, Zhou Gui lurched to his feet. "Absolutely not! If we did that, how would we be any better than those conscienceless thieves who conspired with the officials and merchants in Juexi to resell imperial grain for private profit?"

"Your Excellency, please hear me out." Shen Zechuan's gaze was steady, his manner so calm Zhou Gui couldn't help but sit back down. "The reason there are thieves in Juexi and Hezhou reselling grain at exorbitant prices is the shortage of food all across Zhongbo—and Chazhou is the worst hit. In Qudu, one tael of silver will get you two dan of rice; the same tael of silver in Juexi will get you one dan and five dou[2]—one half dan. But in Chazhou, one tael of silver can only buy you two dou of rice—just a fifth of a dan. The silver in the Chazhou bandits' coffers was all fleeced from the commoners still left in Chazhou. Because of this, good citizens with their names on the household register are starving, and the number of people forced to turn to banditry out of desperation will only increase with time. Your Excellency, this is the same reason Lei Changming—or in fact, Lei Jingzhe—could recruit such a large army within as little as six months.

Now, if Cizhou is willing to sell grain to Chazhou at a price just slightly higher than you would sell to Qudu, you would actually be doing Chazhou a favor."

Kong Ling frowned slightly. "But if we sell grain to Chazhou, there will be a shortage in our own granary. If we have silver in our hands but no grain, will we not find ourselves in the same predicament Chazhou is in now? In that case, the unscrupulous grain merchants in Juexi and Hezhou will be even more ruthless in their extortion."

"Hezhou is far away," Shen Zechuan replied. "Even if you want to do business with them, there's no hurry to make those connections right now. But there's something else I'd like you to consider: I had some knowledge of Huaizhou when I left Qudu. Huaizhou contributed half the military provisions this year—they have an abundance of grain in their stores. The city of Dicheng, on the outskirts of Qudu, lies to the southwest of Huaizhou, and also has a direct connection to Juexi's sea ports. Meanwhile, since Huaizhou wishes to conduct trade through Dicheng, they're going to need money.

"Cizhou can sell its harvest to Chazhou at a markup, then buy the grain it needs from Huaizhou at a lower price. The profit can be used to fund other ventures, while your granary maintains a steady abundance. The grain you store may be provided to the Libei Armored Cavalry at a crucial moment, or kept in reserve for your own needs in Cizhou."

Record-keeping was one of the Embroidered Uniform Guard's responsibilities, and entailed walking the streets and alleys and taking detailed notes of the prices of daily commodities. When Shen Zechuan had held the position of southern judge, he'd been in charge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard's military craftsmen, and had perused their annual records regarding the various regions in the empire. Though Ge Qingqing had offered to make a copy, Shen Zechuan had instead spent an entire night committing the records to memory. Even then he had been wary of the unknown future, unwilling to rely on sheets of paper to safeguard important information. It seemed now his fears had borne out. They'd escaped Qudu in such haste that they'd had no time to bring anything along. Even so, all

the records, files, old registries, and books Shen Zechuan had read in his years in Qudu rode out of the gates with him.

Zhou Gui pondered this. At length, he said, “But if Huaizhou isn’t willing…”

Yet the more Kong Ling thought, the more excited he became. “No—it’s feasible! Luoxia Pass lies to the east of Huaizhou. Local goods from the frontiers of Libei can be exported through it to Huaizhou. From there, it’s a linear route to Juexi’s ports.” He paced a circuit around the room, then slapped his thigh. “That’s right! We should have done this a long time ago! If Cizhou doesn’t adapt to its circumstances, won’t we still be trapped in the same cage as before? This could work!”

Shen Zechuan had never answered the question of how he would keep the Northeast Provisions Trail open for use, but Kong Ling was too preoccupied with this new proposal to pursue the matter. In the candlelight, he seemed to see the spark of hope for Cizhou’s future. After the incident with Lei Changming, Kong Ling had considered Shen Zechuan a man who would stoop to deception and trickery to achieve his goals. Now all that was forgotten. He wanted to take hold of Shen Zechuan and give his thanks, but as he extended his hands, he remembered Xiao Chiye and immediately retracted them. “If we do this, even if we have a surplus of grain in years to come, we won’t have to worry about it moldering in the granaries.”

“Then let’s discuss the garrison troops,” Zhou Gui said from across the table, “and the defense of the city walls.”

Sipping his hot tea, Shen Zechuan hadn’t yet replied when Ding Tao poked his head in and waved vigorously at him from the doorway.

Shen Zechuan rose and walked over. “What is it?”

Ding Tao, who had stepped away earlier, had sprinted all the way back and was sweating profusely. “Gongzi, Gongzi! They’re here!”

Zhou Gui and Kong Ling came over as well, looking on as a very worked-up Ding Tao squeezed his eyes shut and burst into tears. As if sensing the words he’d yet to say, Shen Zechuan stepped out the door in a daze. Between sobs, Ding Tao choked out, “Gongzi! The brothers are back! Qiao Tianya too! And Ji—”

Shen Zechuan strode into the courtyard, where darkness had descended. He still held the teacup in his hand, and the tea spilled as he walked, scalding his fingers red, but he had completely forgotten about it and took no notice. He walked all the way to the gates of the residence without stopping. It was a short journey, but he was sweating all over.

A few cargo wagons were parked outside, and several tall figures stood spread out under the lanterns. The shortest was illuminated in profile where he stood resting by the carriage, still wrapped in his cloak.

Shen Zechuan's chest heaved and the rims of his eyes reddened, but with great effort, he held himself back, unwilling to lay his emotions bare here.

Ji Gang turned at the sound of his approach, nearly tripping over the stone steps when he caught sight of Shen Zechuan. His white hair was disheveled, and his lips quivered. Even before he called out, the tears were streaming down his face.

"Chuan…" Ji Gang stumbled over his words as a child would, despite his white hair. He cursed himself for being so inarticulate as he anxiously beckoned. "You…you…"

Shen Zechuan took the stairs in two strides and lunged forward to hold Ji Gang steady. The teacup crashed to the ground, forgotten. Ji Gang grabbed him by the arms and looked him over. He had lived his life first as an Embroidered Uniform Guard in Qudu and then as a blacksmith in Duanzhou before the Zhongbo catastrophe befell him and he lost both wife and son. He always put on a tough act before others. Yet seeing Shen Zechuan now, he wept uncontrollably.

"Chuan-er…" Ji Gang scrubbed at his eyes with rough fingers and looked at Shen Zechuan over and over again. All the words he wanted to say were condensed to a single: "I'm so glad you're all right."

He was travel-worn, and had thinned quite a bit. Qi Huilian's death weighed heavily on him, and his concern for what Shen Zechuan would encounter after leaving Qudu had propelled him all the way here, unable to eat or sleep. All that suffering had piled up on his already stooped back. He had long ceased to be the Ji Gang renowned across the land, but his

emaciated form was still willing to shelter Shen Zechuan from the wind and rain. For his son, he could travel thousands upon thousands of li; he could fight all the formidable heroes of the nation. He asked for nothing but to see Shen Zechuan alive and well.

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“How have you become so thin?!” Ji Gang could barely hold himself back.

“Shifu.” Shen Zechuan’s voice trembled. “Why has Shifu lost so much weight?”

“It’s just my old age. I get weary when I travel.” Ji Gang dashed his tears away and said happily, “I’m just fine now that I’ve seen you!”

Qiao Tianya brushed the shards of the teacup aside and dropped to one knee. Intending to lighten the atmosphere, he smiled. “Although the journey took a few extra months, I’ve done as my master bade me. So, Master, how about a reward of food and wine? Shifu, let’s take a seat before we talk!”

The courtyard, not big to begin with, now overflowed with people. Kong Ling ordered a table set up outside and told the kitchen to whip up some hot dishes, then served On Horseback as a welcoming refreshment for the newly arrived Embroidered Uniform Guard and Libei guards.

Qiao Tianya chased after Ding Tao’s plump sparrow with a pair of chopsticks. “We’ve worn thin from all that running around, but this one’s gotten fat and shiny from eating out of your hands. Are you going to serve it up to go with our wine?”

Ding Tao, who had been overjoyed at the reunion, scooped up the sparrow and snapped, “No!”

Even starving as he was, Gu Jin didn’t hesitate to knock Qiao Tianya’s chopsticks aside between hurried mouthfuls of rice. “Are you itching for a beating? Why d’you have to pick on a kid?”

“You had the same rations as everyone else on the road,” Chen Yang said over the rim of his cup. “Why are you so hungry?”

“Gu Jin gave away all his food to the children begging along the way.” As the newest member of the group, Fei Sheng knew these were his future comrades, so he chose his words artfully, saying only good things. “This brother is something of a people’s hero; he spent plenty of good copper buying those kids buns.”

“You can rescue a soul from an emergency, but not from endless poverty,” Chen Yang said earnestly. “You’ve got to change that habit of yours—you go soft-hearted whenever you see tears shed. Everyone’s going hungry these days. I’m not telling you not to do good deeds, but you must know where to draw the line.”

Ding Tao piped up from the side. “You spent all your money? Jin-ge, didn’t you say the last time you’d hand it over to me? I’ll save it for you so you can get yourself a wife. I told you to leave it with me long ago—I’m great at keeping records.” As he spoke, he fished out his little book. “It’s written right here that you borrowed three copper coins from me during the new year’s holidays three years ago to buy wine. Of course, it’s not that I care about this little bit of money. I don’t. Really, Ge, I’m just—”

Without pausing between bites, Gu Jin stuffed the cotton he always carried into his right ear and turned it toward Ding Tao. “Is that wine from back home? Give me a jar.”

“Three cups and no more.” Qiao Tianya had already set his chopsticks down. “We have to go report to my master in a moment. Look at you, drinking yourself drunk. Have you forgotten how His Lordship punished you the last time? At a time like this, I’d advise you to act with prudence.”

Qiao Tianya was usually the first to laugh and joke, but as a former judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he could assume a truly imposing air when he wished to. His tone was mild, but his words were pointed.

Gu Jin frowned, irritated, but nodded. “I just want a taste; I haven’t had a drink in months.”

Gradually, the chattering Ding Tao fell silent. He was the youngest among them, and the whole group regarded him as a little brother. None of the older men had ever been stingy in buying him candy. As such, he feared no one and dared get close to everyone. He had a natural gift of discernment and was particularly sensitive to people’s emotions. He could tell his older brothers weren’t as relaxed as they appeared. He cradled his little sparrow in both hands and sat quietly off to the side, making neither noise nor fuss.

They finished their meals as Kong Ling arranged for servants to clear out a courtyard and its surrounding rooms so the travel-worn guests had a place to rest. It was nearing midnight; Shen Zechuan had Ding Tao lead Ji Gang away to retire for the night. The lead guards all had reports to make, and stood in single file on the veranda, waiting to be called inside.

“Everyone, come in and take a seat,” said Shen Zechuan. “We can discuss it together.”

When all of them had settled with Shen Zechuan in the seat of honor, he began with Chen Yang. “Did the collection of the military provisions in Huaizhou go smoothly?”

Chen Yang sat up straight and organized his thoughts for a moment. “No. As Gongzi predicted before I left, the Huaizhou officials tried everything to stonewall us and stall the collection. The fighting in Libei was intense at the time, and my master’s two-day deadline was just around the corner. I was burning with anxiety. It was Lord Jiang, the defender of Luoxia Pass, who stepped up to vouch for me; only then did Huaizhou finally release the grain. Fortunately, we made it in time, and as the Provisions Trail leads straight to Libei, the delay didn’t affect the fighting.” At this point, he fell silent for a moment. “I saw our shizi back in Libei. He was severely injured. When he heard my master had been ambushed back in Qudu, he wanted to lead the troops out to bring him home. Unfortunately, His Lordship the prince overruled him.”

Shen Zechuan asked for no further details, but turned to Gu Jin. “You came to Cizhou to oversee the collection of grain back then. Compared to the prefect of Huaizhou, Zhou Gui is much easier to deal with. So why do you also look troubled?”

Gu Jin looked somewhat taken aback at being addressed directly. Everyone noticed his distraction. But Shen Zechuan was looking at him, so after a little hesitation he replied, “It’s true I didn’t encounter any difficulties when I came to Cizhou to supervise the transportation of military provisions. I went along with the troops and delivered the grain to the front lines well in advance of the deadline. I even saw His Lordship the prince in the eastern range of the Hongyan Mountains.” He spoke at a measured pace, and when he stopped, he paused for a very long time.

“I heard my master had left Qudu, so I’d been waiting for him to return home. It was only when I ran into Chen Yang when he came to deliver the provisions to the army that I learned that my master had stopped in Cizhou. After that, I rushed over here.”

Libei was just north of Cizhou. Logically, Gu Jin and Chen Yang should’ve arrived before Qiao Tianya.

Shen Zechuan tapped his fingers lightly on the tabletop. He set this question aside and addressed Qiao Tianya. “And you? I want the details.”

Elbows draped over the armrests of his chair, Qiao Tianya rattled off his answer. “I raced off to search for Shifu and Xiansheng on your orders. I followed the trail to the inner chamber of the Xue manor, at which point I discovered Xue Xiuzhuo had moved Shifu to the broker house on Donglong Street. But there was no trace of Xiansheng there. We were too late… And after you left, we couldn’t leave through the city gate, so we had to lay low in Qudu.”

He shot a glance at Fei Sheng. “It just so happened that this guy was also hiding from the noble clans’ searches with his people. We tried every means to get out, but Han Cheng had the city sealed up so tight not even a drop of water could trickle through. Left with nowhere to go, we hid at the marquis’s Plum Blossom Manor. Well, as luck would have it, I found a map there with the layout of all Qudu’s public ditches—the very same one His Lordship had tricked out of the Pan Clan.”

Xiao Chiye had acquired this item from Pan Lin during the banquet he’d hosted to celebrate his promotion to the rank of marquis. At that time, he had obtained the plans only as a contingency—yet in an unexpected turn of events, it became the key to Qiao Tianya’s escape from Qudu.

Here, Fei Sheng took up the telling. “We crawled our way out through the public ditches.” He gestured to make his point. “The public ditches in many of the streets are newly dug. I don’t know if this was His Lordship’s intent, but they’re all narrow at the top and much wider inside. There are even some candles and field rations stored in the dry corners. Over fifty of us traveling together relied on those rations as we tried to

shake the Eight Great Battalions for more than ten days before we finally made it out of Qudu on the side closest to Mount Feng."

"Once we were out, we realized Han Cheng had set up checkpoints on all the public roads going to and from the eight cities around Qudu," Qiao Tianya continued. "We pawned all the gold, silver, and jade pendants we had on us and disguised ourselves as traveling merchants. We made a detour and went south to Chuancheng and then around to Chazhou, then hurried from Chazhou over to Cizhou. When we arrived in Chazhou a fortnight ago, we got word that Han Cheng had delivered the imperial heir to the palace. But news was hard to come by after leaving Chazhou, so we haven't heard what happened after. If we want the details, we'll have to wait for Ge Qingqing's letter."

No one disturbed Shen Zechuan as he contemplated Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng's news. Shen Zechuan could hear Ding Tao's footsteps outside on the veranda. He waited until the boy appeared at the door before saying, "The two of you must be tired. Go with Ding Tao and rest for tonight."

Fei Sheng was a discerning man; he knew a dismissal when he heard one. He was in no hurry to profess his loyalty tonight; he rose in one smooth move and, alongside Qiao Tianya, bade farewell to their master and withdrew.

The candle flame flickered and popped.

Since making his brief report, Gu Jin hadn't lifted his head or uttered a sound. He submerged himself in the darkness, the writhing shadows from the candle falling upon his face like two figures scuffling with one another.

Shen Zechuan remained remarkably cool-headed. "Did something happen to you two in Libei?"

Chen Yang propped his elbow on the armrest and wiped a hand over his face. At last he said, "I've been staying close to Shizi, so nothing really happened to me. It's Gu Jin."

In the unbearable silence, Gu Jin undid his clasps, shrugged off his upper garment, and turned around to expose a nasty wound on his back. "This matter should have been reported directly to my master, but he won't be back for a few days. As per his instructions back in Qudu, I'll report to

Gongzi first. I arrived at the front lines, where the fighting was the most intense; His Lordship the prince and Commander Zuo are both safe. After they finished inspecting the military provisions, I temporarily took up my old position in the vanguard of the reconnaissance squad, clashing with the cavalry of the Hanma tribe day in and day out. On one of those days, I can't remember which, we encountered an ambush as I was leading the squad back from the eastern mountain range."

The wound on his back had festered, the rotting skin already scraped away in several spots. Blood seeped through the bandages.

"I was hit by an arrow but managed to escape with my life. I thought we'd been ambushed by a party from the Hanma tribe, so I led my remaining two hundred men around the grasslands where the Hanma tribe lurks to make our way back through Tudalung Banner's swamps. But we were ambushed again that very night in Tudalung Banner."

Gu Jin pulled his robe back on and secured his clasps. "Gongzi, I got my start as a scout. It's because of my keen eyes and ears that I was chosen by His Lordship the prince to be a guard. I may not be as sharp as I was after all these quiet years in Qudu, but after my master's admonition, I've never dared be negligent—especially on the battlefield, where I tread with a lot more caution. That night, I issued all the orders for our patrol routes on the spot. I never discussed it with anyone. Yet we were ambushed twice. I started to suspect the Hanma tribe had someone on the inside.

"During our second escape, I discovered there had been snake venom on the arrowhead. Ding Tao covered his steel needles with this poison in the past; it comes from the western range of the Hongyan Mountains. At the time, my back was festering pretty bad, and the enemy was right on our tail in the swamps. After being bitten by some poisonous bugs, I was in bad shape—by dawn, I had a fever."

At this point, Gu Jin stopped. He spoke dully, pausing many times as if checking himself lest he speak a single word wrong. He knew the implications of what he was about to say.

"Our horses drowned in the swamp, and I couldn't walk. The Libei Armored Cavalry's base camp lies only ten li or so south of Tudalung

Banner, yet strangely, we encountered no patrols that day. I sent my trusted assistant general ahead first while I remained to await reinforcements, but even after I waited through dawn the next day, no one came. I was worried the spy would make use of the opportunity to infiltrate Base Camp, so I pushed myself to hurry back. I made it back, escaping by the skin of my teeth, but when I arrived, I was stripped of my blade and locked up. I spent the entire night in the prison shack where the Biansha prisoners-of-war were held. On the second day, I was taken to the commander's tent and court-martialed, with the general of the camp, Guo Weili, presiding."

Gu Jin omitted the details of the trial; he had no desire to recall it. It had been, to him, not a physical pain, but the collapse of some long-held ideal. He continued in a voice so soft as to be almost imperceptible. "They accused me of being in covert communication with the Hanma tribe and plotting to wipe out another vanguard squad further east of Tudalung Banner that night. They stripped me of my rank and demanded that I confess whether I'd done it on someone else's instructions. Well, I can't confess to something I didn't do. I asked why the camp ignored my two consecutive requests for reinforcements; they claimed they never received them. According to military law, I should've undergone a joint trial by three generals before the commander in chief personally authorized my execution. But Guo Weili insisted that Shizi had yet to recover from his injuries, and that he had the authority to act on the heir's behalf. If not for Chen Yang arriving in the nick of time, I doubt I'd be standing before Gongzi now."

Shen Zechuan reached for a silver needle and picked off the top of the candle wick; the flame went out. He stared at the dark candle, which seemed to be shedding waxen tears. Countless thoughts flashed through his mind. He didn't need Chen Yang and Gu Jin to remind him that, according to the letter of appointment from the Ministry of War, Guo Weili had been personally promoted from the lowest ranks over the years by Xiao Jiming himself.

Xiao Chiye followed Lei Jingzhe's trail all the way to the north side of the camp where they'd first encountered him. He dismounted and

grabbed a handful of soil and squinted at the terrain ahead.

Tantai Hu surveyed the mountain range dominating the horizon. “If they go any farther north, they’re going to step across Libei’s borders. They won’t dare head there, so they’ll have no choice but to split up and flee. Master, he’s leading us on a wild goose chase. We’ll wear ourselves out if we keep chasing them like this.”

“He’s indeed doing just that.” Xiao Chiye opened his hand and let the soil fall through his fingers. “They’re splitting off in small streams that will slip through our large net. But if *we* split up now, we’ll fall into his trap. He’s not willing to fight me head-on. He can’t handle the full momentum of the Imperial Army, and he’s worried his own men will lose focus and morale. But they know this area well—they’ll do anything they can think of to lure us into splitting up so they can pick us off one by one.”

“We don’t have enough cavalry.” Tantai Hu examined the terrain. “This son of a bitch is too crafty!”

“We’re in no hurry.” Xiao Chiye stood up.

Meng returned from his own reconnaissance and landed on Xiao Chiye’s shoulder, perching on his master in the night breeze. The wind rustled the tall grass, scattering a few strands of willow leaves.

“Of the five categories of weapons, fire is the most intense.” Xiao Chiye mounted Snowcrest again. “We’ll smoke him out.”

Tantai Hu followed suit and got on his horse. “But this area is dense with trees and brush. If it burns, the fire might spread to the grasslands of Libei.”

Xiao Chiye laughed out loud astride his horse. “I’m not asking you to set a fire here. Go. Hit every town and village along the main road. Have them put up notices announcing that anyone who harbors bandits will be executed on the spot. However, if they report the bandits to the Imperial Army, they’ll be rewarded in copper; I’ll pay out for each man they give up. And tell them this—Cizhou will be posting enlistment notices for the new garrison troops soon. If they join up, they’ll get three square meals a day if nothing else, and any informants who have been rewarded by the Imperial

Army will get priority treatment. Since Lei Jingzhe wants to hide, I'll force him to expose himself."

Tantai Hu hesitated, but couldn't keep quiet. "Aren't we out of money?"

"Report the figures to Lanzhou when we get back." Xiao Chiye urged Snowcrest forward, then reined him in and looked back to say, "Can your Er-gongzi really not scrounge up a few handfuls of copper coins?"

Tantai Hu looked embarrassed.

Xiao Chiye twirled his thumb ring and said coolly, "Oh."

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Chapter 114:
Intensity of Flames

LEI JINGZHE had gone hungry for a whole day. He squatted near a pigsty with a bowl in his hand, shoving his hard-earned cornmeal porridge into his mouth with a single-minded ferocity. Beside him was his subordinate, a rascal around the same age as Ding Tao but built like an ox; the young man wolfed down his food as ravenously as Lei Jingzhe. A burly cook poked his head out of the open kitchen window above them and banged a ladle on the rim of his pot. “There’s still some broth left. Want it? Better get your ass over here quick!”

“Yes, yes!” The boy, whose name was Li Xiong—*Bear*—dashed to the window with his mouth still full of porridge. Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he held out his bowl, eyes trained on the clear broth in the pot.

“You’ve got quite the appetite.” The cook tipped out the last bits of broth. “Tell your older brother to get a job; then you won’t have to starve like this!”

“My brother’s gonna do great things!” Seeing some soup about to drip from the side of the bowl, Li Xiong swiped it with a finger and sucked it clean.

The cook dabbed at his forehead with his apron. Seeing this boy who looked like a sturdy young calf, he wiped the sweat off Li Xiong’s brow too, muttering, “Your face is as dirty as the bottom of a pot, and I’ll bet no one’s taking care of you at home. Hey, you there. What are you doing with yourself all day? At least clean this kid up a bit!”

Still chewing on pickled vegetables, Lei Jingzhe flashed the cook a good-natured smile.

Li Xiong trotted over and poured his broth into Lei Jingzhe’s bowl, as if offering up a priceless treasure. “You have it, Ge!”

“Good lad!” Lei Jingzhe accepted it readily, then threw his head back and downed it in a gulp. He peered at the sun overhead, sweating in its scorching heat. He squinted his stinging eyes against the light, shifted his feet, and cursed under his breath, “Motherfucker!”

“Motherfucker,” Li Xiong parroted, shifting to shield Lei Jingzhe from the sun.

Lei Jingzhe propped an elbow up on his knee. “How’s it look out there?”

Li Xiong craned his neck and peered around before answering in a small voice. “They’re still searching!”

Face betraying his irritation, Lei Jingzhe hung his head, exposing a scorpion tattoo on the back of his neck, the tail drenched with sweat. He had dispersed his people after fleeing Cizhou, taking with him only this dolt of a lad he had raised himself, then snuck into a small town along the public road and watched as the Imperial Army ran back and forth looking for him. He was waiting for Xiao Chiye to lose patience and scatter his troops for the search. But Xiao Chiye wasn’t impatient in the least. Instead, he had set a fire along the road with his bounty notices, stirring up panic among Lei Jingzhe’s men.

“The reward the Imperial Army’s offering is pathetic; that copper’s not enough to pay for our brothers’ drinks,” Li Xiong said, puzzled. “Ge, why are so many people stepping forward?”

“It’s *because* it’s small.” Lei Jingzhe’s eyes gleamed, sharp under sweat-darkened brows. “The price he’s offering is perfect.”

Had Xiao Chiye offered a bounty of a few silver taels, the common folk might not have been willing to come forward. Zhongbo had been hit with disaster after disaster in recent years, and bandits were rampant. A higher reward suggested a difficult task, as well as danger that might well cost them their lives. A bounty of a few handfuls of copper coins was a different story. This made it a trivial matter to inform the Imperial Army of any traces of the bandits. Not to mention, no one would be the wiser about who had come forward, since copper coins could be spent in a flash; even if

the bandits returned to seek vengeance, they had little chance of tracking the informants down.

“Then what should we do?” Face dripping from the heat, Li Xiong looked at Lei Jingzhe. “Ge, why don’t we just fuckin’ go for it?! He only has twenty thousand men.”

Lei Jingzhe, too, was restless. He knew what Xiao Chiye intended—the man wanted to flush them out and force them to act. But Lei Jingzhe was fully aware that he was leading a motley crew cobbled together from two prefectures. None of them had received formal military training. They would be trounced the moment they abandoned their current advantage and faced off against the well-equipped Imperial Army. Yet hiding forever wasn’t an option either. Lei Jingzhe could lay low, but how long could those roughshod subordinates of his keep it together?

Sweating, Lei Jingzhe stared at the muck under his feet. “That man’s underhanded; he won’t play fair. He hasn’t sent anyone to block us from going north—that’s exactly where he wants us to go. He knows Libei waits for us there, and he’s gambling that we won’t dare cross their borders.”

But damn it! Choking with pent-up frustration, Lei Jingzhe spat on the ground. He really didn’t dare to do it!

“We’ll wait here one more night.” Lei Jingzhe jerked to his feet. “Go. Tell Liu’er to spread the word to the others still in town that we’ll leave immediately if things look bad. Worse comes to worst, we’ll retreat to Mount Luo. I have all the patience in the world to play this little game with Xiao Chiye!”

Xiao Chiye was eating, making a meal of a few steamed buns and some cheap pickled vegetables. Seated on a wooden post for tethering horses, he watched his soldiers speaking with commoners who had come forth with tips, issuing them paper slips that could be exchanged for copper coins.

“Master,” Tantai Hu greeted as he walked over. “He really is something, spreading his people so thin. How can he give orders this way? He can’t be going around knocking on doors, can he?”

“He’s a bandit chief; I’m sure he has his ways.” Xiao Chiye scratched Meng, who was perched on his shoulder. “The gyrfalcons we raise in Libei are also capable of passing military intelligence swiftly.”

“We’ve captured quite a few of his people now,” Tantai Hu reported. “What shall we do with them?”

“Kill them.”

Tantai Hu looked over at where the bandits were held, then back at Xiao Chiye. He lowered his voice. “But I’ve heard some of them are sons from honest families. Are we to kill them all?”

Xiao Chiye glanced at him. “Since they went to Mount Luo to bow at Lei Jingzhe’s feet and join the bandits, they should have expected this day would come. I’m here to eradicate bandits. There’s no reason for me to show mercy to the enemy. Let me ask you this: If everyone with a mouth says they’re from an honest family, which of them do you believe, and which do you condemn?”

Tantai Hu was quiet.

Xiao Chiye stood and watched as Meng launched himself from his shoulder and flew away. “I know you’re thinking of the Biansha Horsemen. But Lao-Hu, don’t misplace your sympathies. You’ve been in the army a long time. I shouldn’t have to tell you this. Can’t you figure it out yourself?”

Tantai Hu hung his head and made to kneel.

“Stand up.” Xiao Chiye patted his shoulder. “You’re a general leading his soldiers now, not a squad leader standing guard at the city gate of Dengzhou. Don’t get mixed up.”

Xiao Chiye was a generous superior, but he was also exacting, and made sure the guards around him knew where they stood. The last time Chen Yang stood idly by, Xiao Chiye’s treatment had left him more upset than if he’d been whipped. But guards and generals were two different things. Why didn’t Xiao Chiye let Chen Yang lead the troops? Zhao Hui, his counterpart at Xiao Jiming’s side, was a valiant general. Xiao Chiye clearly had other considerations.

Though Xiao Chiye hadn’t raised his voice or even frowned, Tantai Hu was shamefaced nonetheless. None of them could get a handle on Xiao Chiye’s true thoughts, yet even when Xiao Chiye used such a relaxed tone, Tantai Hu began to reflect on the error of his ways.

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Chapter 115:
Destiny

SWING AFTER SWING, the Imperial Army's blades pressed toward them. The soil underfoot was already soaked in blood. One bandit was pinned to the ground, listening to the never-ending screams of his compatriots, his own pants dark where he had wet himself. The dull edge of a blade pressed against the back of his neck, and his nose and mouth were smeared with bloody mud, choking him until tears and mucus flowed. "I don't know!" he cried in terror. "I really don't know where he is!"

Lei Jingzhe was suspicious by nature; he had been secretive about his whereabouts even back on Mount Luo. Other than his most trusted aides, no one knew exactly where along the roads he was hiding.

Tantai Hu scraped muck off the soles of his boots. "Since you know nothing, why are you wasting our time? Take him away!"

Someone hauled on the rope binding the bandit's hands behind his back, dragging him toward the execution spot. He kicked desperately, glancing at the headless corpses lying to either side of him. He could feel the blade at his nape turning over, its sharp edge sending shivers down his spine. As Tantai Hu lifted the sword, he suddenly burst into sobs.

"Liu'er! Sir! I know where Liu'er is!"

Tantai Hu paused. "Is this person a trusted aide of Lei Jingzhe?"

"Yes, yes, a trusted aide!" The bandit's chest heaved as he stared wide-eyed at the blade hanging above him. "Liu'er's our 'carrier pigeon.' He passes on all Lei Jingzhe's orders! He's the one who sent a messenger to me when I was hiding out west with my men!"

After most of the night, Tantai Hu had finally managed to pry some information from these bandits' mouths. He hoisted the bandit up. "Where's this Liu'er now?"

"In Bianshui Town. The information I got a few days back came from Bianshui Town. If you look for him now, you'll find him there for sure!"

Bianshui Town was just a few miles away. This, Tantai Hu thought, didn't bode well. They had searched the town many times already; if the enemy was there, he'd been alerted long ago. He dropped the bandit and strode off to report to Xiao Chiye.

The Imperial Army promptly changed direction and raced to Bianshui Town. They blocked off all the exits and searched from house to house, detaining any recent arrivals of unknown origin and anyone who wasn't on a household register. They had the bandit look at each of their faces, but Liu'er and Lei Jingzhe were nowhere among them.

By now, dawn was creeping over the horizon. Fearing Xiao Chiye would take out his anger on him, the bandit racked his brain for suggestions. "Liu'er has lots of men under him; they're his eyes and ears. Whenever he heads out for battle, they spread out all around him to help relay news to Lei Jingzhe. If they're not here now, it's because they heard you were coming and fled. You've blocked all the roads to the south, and we don't dare venture north. All that's left is to retreat east. If you give chase now, you'll catch up to them for sure!"

Although Tantai Hu despised a spineless coward who sold out his master to save his own sorry life, he dutifully reported the bandit's words to Xiao Chiye. Sitting atop his horse, Xiao Chiye considered for a moment. "Take half your men and follow them along the eastern side of the woods on the mountain. They're now birds that will startle at the twang of a bowstring. Intimidate them a little, and they'll be so panicked they won't be able to turn around and engage us properly. Hit them hard. Even if they've got a thousand people, they're scattered soldiers without a commander. They should pose no problem for you."

Tantai Hu acknowledged his orders, only to see Xiao Chiye gather the remaining men. "If that's the case, why doesn't Master wait for me here? There's no need for you to go out yourself."

"Look at Lei Jingzhe's pattern of behavior—he's not just paranoid, he's terrified of death. Whatever we've thought of, he'll have thought of it, too. If they've nowhere to go but east, he'll go, but not with such a large contingent of troops. They're too big a target, and too obvious." Xiao Chiye gripped his riding crop. "He didn't scruple to use Lei Changming as live

bait the first time, and he won't hesitate to use those thousand bandits now. Don't worry, just head east. I'll take the rest of the men and cut him off."

It had been scorching the past two days; under the blazing heat of the sun, the bandits, already churning with anxiety, grew even more restless. They squatted in clusters in the mountainous woods. No one had seen any sign of Lei Jingzhe, and they loudly questioned Liu'er, who was standing on a protruding rock.

"You've got a seat at the table, don't you? Surely Master Liu knows more than we do about the whereabouts of our deputy chief. Where is he? Tell us!"

Liu'er stuffed tobacco into his pipe but couldn't manage to find a flint. He squatted on the rock and looked up into the clear, cloudless sky. It was too bright; everything was laid bare beneath it, with nowhere to hide. "Well, I'm here to pass on the message, aren't I?" He clicked his tongue. "The deputy chief says go home!"

A man stood up and said in a booming voice, "The Imperial Army has captured a few hundred of the brothers who follow me. I still don't know if they're alive or dead. I'm waiting for the deputy chief to come up with some way to save my men, and all he's got to say is 'go home'? Ain't that just tucking our tails between our legs and running scared?!" Unhappy, he went on, "All of us were big names back on Mount Luo, and we followed the deputy chief to Cizhou so we could eat and drink as we pleased. But look at us now! We've all become cowards—tortoises hiding in our shells. I'm so fucking pissed I could spit!"

"It's just a bit of bad luck." Liu'er looked like a shrewd old monkey, and he had a similarly circumspect way of handling things. He had plenty to complain about regarding Lei Jingzhe's most recent orders, but he would never say so. Attempting to smooth things over, he said, "Even if you return to Mount Luo now, you'll still be a big name; who'll dare say otherwise? But even a warhorse will stumble from time to time. One defeat is just a little setback. Report the men you've lost to the leaders later and get the

deputy chief to cough up some silver to make it up to you. He's not going to stiff you."

"Who gives a damn about some silver?" the man, Ding Niu, cried. "Those men were my brothers! Are brothers so easily replaced nowadays? Haven't you seen the notices the Imperial Army posted? Cizhou wants to rebuild its garrison troops, and they're offering meals and farmland. Why would anyone give up the chance at a position with them to join *us*? Maybe if they were kicked in the head by a donkey! Right now, we have a lot more men than the Imperial Army—we should've stood our ground and fought them the first time we ran into them outside Cizhou's gates! The deputy chief is a coward. What the fuck was he afraid of?! Now look at the spot we're in. We didn't even fight, yet we've already lost!" He spat into the dirt; sounds of agreement rang out all around.

Liu'er squinted, deepening the creases around his eyes as he spoke. "The deputy chief is just being cautious. The Imperial Army is well-equipped. Look at their armor: It's so polished it shines. If we really come to blows, we might not be their match."

"They're nothing more than donkey shit that looks a little shiny on the outside!" Ding Niu ground his spittle into the dirt with the sole of his shoe. "What kind of soldiers are the Imperial Army, anyway? How many battles have they fought? They can't fight for shit! They fought once against the Eight Great Battalions on the border of Zhongbo—can that even be considered a battle? A pissing contest more like! Whoever stands the fucking longest wins!"

Laughter broke out all around.

Ding Niu noisily cleared his throat and tugged at his collar, revealing a chest burned red from the sun. "If you ask me, there's no reason to leave in a hurry. Cizhou is a gold mine. If we miss out this time, it'll be harder to lay our hands on it the next! The Imperial Army is going around posting notices everywhere to get common folk to tip them off, but that just means they're afraid of us, no? If not, they can bring it on! We're all regrouped here, and we have five or six thousand people. We can give the Imperial Army a huge headache if we fight them with guerilla tactics here in the mountains."

Liu’er neither kicked up a fuss with Ding Niu nor made a new decision. Rubbing the pipe in his hand, he said, “The deputy chief said to go back. If you still want to fight them, tell him yourself.”

Ding Niu sneered. “He’s a cowering tortoise hiding his head under his crotch. How am I supposed to tell him when I can’t even find him? He doesn’t dare show his face. What’s he afraid of? Is a spy from the Imperial Army hiding among the brothers? Bah!”

His anger was in earnest. The man who had taken an arrow for Lei Jingzhe when he fled Xiao Chiye had been none other than this man’s prospective brother-in-law. His little sister was just as burly as he was, and the young lady had struggled to find a good match; it hadn’t been easy to find a man who treated her well. They had planned to hold the wedding at the end of the year. Who would’ve expected Lei Jingzhe to use him as a human shield? Ding Niu hated Lei Jingzhe for being stone-hearted, and he resented him even more for subjecting his men to their current humiliation.

“I’ll repeat exactly what the deputy chief said.” Liu’er got to his feet and knocked his pipe against his hip. “Right now, we’re the vanguard squad. We don’t have as many people as before, but we’re still worlds apart from those minor bandits we came across along the way. If we can slip out of Cizhou’s borders within five days and meet at the relay station in Dunzhou, we’ll be back in our own territory. We’ll have nothing to fear then even if the Imperial Army wants to pursue us that far.” When he saw the fury on the man’s face, he continued, “Of course, the deputy chief is still hurrying over here. Whether we stay or go is open for discussion.”

The Mount Luo bandits had initially been gathered from various mountain strongholds. Although Lei Changming had been headstrong, he was generous to the men he called brothers, showering them with meat, wine, money, and women. Even if they made a mistake, they merely had to grovel a little and plead for mercy and the matter would be dropped.

Lei Jingzhe was different. Not only did he rarely show himself, he was severe in meting out punishments. Nine out of ten wrongdoers were slated for death once he caught them. His reign relied on intimidation; those who feared him greatly outnumbered those who respected him. Now, in the face of such desperate circumstances, it was inevitable his men would start

to get other ideas. If someone else could take a turn at being the emperor, surely the same went for chief of the bandits! *He who is capable is qualified!*

Watching Liu'er spin like a weathercock as he tried to avoid offending either side, Ding Niu said, "Fine, the deputy chief isn't here, and he's telling us to flee by ourselves. He can be a two-faced coward, but *we* can't! The Imperial Army is still at Bianshui Town, yes? Liu'er, you better not fucking leave any traces behind! We use this spot as our base camp and harass them in small groups. We know our way around these mountains. As soon as the Imperial Army gathers their forces and turns around to engage us, we'll run back here. If they dare pursue us into the mountains, we'll take them all down! An army like that won't hold out for more than a few days against these kinds of cat-and-mouse tactics. Once we've tired them out, we'll charge our way down and beat the shit out of them! If we flatten the Imperial Army, the city of Cizhou will fall into our hands, won't it? So, how about it? Are we doing this?!"

Fired up by his speech, the bandits erupted in cheers of agreement. For the past few days, they had been living like vermin, detested by all. Not only were they hunted like rats by the Imperial Army, now they also had to be wary of unarmed commoners. They could neither eat nor sleep in peace. When had they ever been made to endure such hardship back on Mount Luo?

"Yes! We'll follow Ding-dage's lead!"

Pleased, Ding Niu laughed and nodded in satisfaction. "All of us here have brothers who were captured by the Imperial Army. Now it's time to get our revenge! If Xiao Chiye dares to kill one of our men, we'll kill ten of his! Who knows, when we occupy Cizhou and take his little brother captive, Xiao Jiming might even try to cozy up to *us*!"

The bandits were in high spirits, and for a moment, everyone was talking over one another about the good life they could look forward to after occupying Cizhou. Ding Niu was walking on air from the praise, his confidence in this plan growing with every moment. His thoughts were already leaping ahead to bringing his younger sister over and finding her another husband, one even better than the man who died. At that point he

was struck with a bolt of inspiration—*Why not have her marry Xiao Chiye?* Not only was he handsome, he was taller than Ding Niu, had an excellent build, and came from a good family.

Ding Niu was picturing the children and grandchildren that would fill his house when he saw the apprentice on sentry duty scrambling up from the foot of the mountain. His face was pale with fright as he announced, “The Imperial Army is here!”

Liu’er backed away into the long grass in an attempt to flee, but Ding Niu grabbed the wily old fart and lugged him off the ground. “You tipped the Imperial Army off?!” he demanded with a glare.

Hunched over with his long arms dangling and his white eyebrows almost trailing to the ground, Liu’er frantically shook his head. “It wasn’t me! How could it be me? If I did it, I wouldn’t have come!”

Ding Niu set Liu’er back on the ground and braced himself before pronouncing, “Great! Since they’ve come calling at our door, we’ll go out and meet them!”

Lei Jingzhe galloped down the road at a furious pace. He had already skirted around the woods on the eastern side of the mountain and was presently circling back. With Ding Niu, Liu’er, and the rest of their group occupying the Imperial Army, more than half of their troops would be held up, and the remainder had stayed behind to guard the southern side of Cizhou as well as the villages and towns along the way.

He was determined to be the fish that slipped through the net.

The only company Lei Jingzhe had brought along was the dolt Li Xiong—not because he trusted him, but because this kid had been brought up by him from a sprout. He could be counted on to be obedient, and Lei Jingzhe could tell what he was thinking at a glance.

Lei Jingzhe was on horseback, while Li Xiong ran behind him on foot. He ran with great, vigorous strides and had no trouble keeping up with Lei Jingzhe’s horse. They had already been on the road all night, and Li

Xiong was still naively looking forward to meeting up with Liu’er and the rest.

“Have some water.” Lei Jingzhe tossed the waterskin to Li Xiong as he reined his horse to a halt. “We won’t be stopping to rest today.”

Li Xiong uncorked the waterskin and gulped down more than half.

“You stupid brat!” Lei Jingzhe cursed at him. “If you drink it all now, what are we going to drink tonight? With that much water in your stomach, you’re going to be whining about wanting to piss later!”

“I won’t, Ge.” Li Xiong wiped his mouth with a smile and patted his stomach. “I’ll just run it off!”

Lei Jingzhe hung the waterskin back on the saddle. “Are you hungry?”

Li Xiong shook his head. “I stuffed myself last night; my stomach’s still full! We’ll have meat once we’re back on Mount Luo.”

Thus assured, Lei Jingzhe didn’t tarry any longer and raced ahead with Li Xiong in tow. They had allies in Dunzhou, and the relay station there could pass on his orders to mobilize the bandit troops still guarding Mount Luo. Lei Jingzhe didn’t dare slow his pace. He was still uneasy. He had to arrive before news of the capture of Ding Niu, Liu’er, and the others made its way back to Mount Luo. If that news arrived first, a good half of the trust and reputation he’d built up in his time on Mount Luo would crumble in an instant, and it would be much harder to command the men.

The checkpoints along the roads gradually grew more lax, no longer as strict as they had been within a few miles of Bianshui Town. The number of Imperial Army soldiers thinned as well; once Lei Jingzhe passed the outlying vegetable fields, he no longer saw any signs of them. At night, he and Li Xiong rested beside a small stream. Li Xiong speared a few fish and roasted them for Lei Jingzhe. Without seasoning or herbs, the flesh tasted fishy and bitter, but Li Xiong ate with relish and, after filling his stomach, collapsed onto his back and fell asleep.

Lei Jingzhe didn’t dare leave the campfire burning through the night; he covered it with dirt before lying down himself. He hadn’t slept for a day

and a night. Gradually, he found it harder and harder to keep his eyes open. He leaned against a tree and drifted off.

He didn't know how much time had passed when he startled awake. He propped himself up, stilled his breathing, and listened for any signs of activity in the forest.

The wind was strong tonight. Tree branches swayed, setting the leaves rustling in intermittent waves. Li Xiong was still sound asleep, his snores thunderous. Lei Jingzhe listened intently for a long time. He heard nothing amiss, yet he couldn't shake his unease. He kicked Li Xiong awake and silently gestured for the boy to get the horse.

As Li Xiong untangled the reins from the tree where he'd tied their mount, he felt a powerful urge to relieve himself. They had never stopped for a break during the day, and he had fallen right asleep after dinner. Unable to hold it any longer, he whispered to Lei Jingzhe, "Ge, I gotta pee."

Lei Jingzhe clicked his tongue and made a fist as if to thrash him, then motioned for him to hurry. Li Xiong stepped behind a tree and loosened his belt. The tinkling sound echoed in the silent wood.

Having still seen no signs of movement, Lei Jingzhe began to relax. He led the horse forward a few steps. The horse whickered, and he suddenly realized what was off.

Why wasn't there even a chirp from the birds or insects?

Li Xiong wasn't yet done relieving himself when he heard Lei Jingzhe mount his horse and hiss, "Let's go!"

The boy yelped in acknowledgment, then rushed to tie his belt and ran after the horse. Lei Jingzhe lashed the horse's flank with his riding crop and charged haphazardly through the shadows cast by the trees. The branches swayed in the wind, looming like demons brandishing their claws and baring their fangs, closing in from all sides.

Lei Jingzhe's back was drenched in cold sweat, freezing in the wind. He didn't look back at Li Xiong; his sole focus was on leaving this forest as quickly as possible. The horse under him was exhausted from running all

throughout the day. No matter how he whipped it, it couldn't gallop as fast as it had when it was fresh.

The sound of footsteps came drumming toward him from all sides. Lei Jingzhe was struck by the sense that he was being chased by some gargantuan beast, so massive it shook the ground. He crashed headlong through the tangle of trees and charged out of the forest, only to yank back on the reins, gasping for breath as he stared fixedly ahead.

The hem of Xiao Chiye's robe fluttered behind him in the wind. Perched on his shoulder was a gyrfalcon, its head tilted quizzically to one side. The darkness of the night seemed to spread from behind Xiao Chiye, weighing on Lei Jingzhe's limbs, swallowing them and rendering him immobile as he sat stiffly atop the horse.

A raspy whistle escaped Lei Jingzhe's throat. He snapped back to his senses and dragged his horse around, but the Imperial Army was already behind him. Xiao Chiye had deliberately hidden some of his men in the cover of the forest, preventing Lei Jingzhe from guessing how many he had with him—a direct counterpart to Lei Jingzhe's deception as he'd approached Cizhou. Now Lei Jingzhe, too, could enjoy being played for a fool.

"Go ahead and run," Xiao Chiye said, his voice deep.

Lei Jingzhe released the reins and raised both hands, palms open. "You win. I concede defeat."

Snowcrest shook its head and neighed. Xiao Chiye said nothing.

Lei Jingzhe slid off his horse, keeping both hands up to indicate his surrender. He was very clear about his current predicament. Once he had dismounted, he removed the broadsword from his waist and met Xiao Chiye's eyes as he bent to lay it on the ground. "We can still talk."

Interest piqued, Xiao Chiye said, "Go on."

Lei Jingzhe steadied his breathing. Surrounded by the cold glint of steel, beads of sweat ran down his temples. "You're going back to Libei. You won't be in Cizhou long. Killing me now won't deter the bandits of Mount Luo forever. When they come back here, it will plunge Dunzhou and

Duanzhou—which have only just begun to see some recovery—into chaos. Why not let me go? I can keep the situation in both prefectures stable, and Cizhou will have time to rebuild its garrison troops."

The cawing of a crow rang out overhead. Meng braced himself. Spreading his wings, he took to the air, gliding on the wind, then swooped into the dark canopy of the trees. The forest seemed to hold its breath. Lei Jingzhe kept his gaze trained on Xiao Chiye, as if to prove he was confident of success—it was not the end of the road for him yet.

Xiao Chiye lifted a hand and rested it by his waist.

The two men faced each other in silence. In the instant Meng's talons tore into the crow, Lei Jingzhe flipped up his broadsword with his toe, flung off its sheath, and dove forward in a roll. Springing up from the ground, he arced into the air and swung the sword straight down toward Xiao Chiye's face. Blade collided with blade, throwing sparks as they scraped against each other in a show of their wielders' power.

The scorching heat that had persisted for several days had dissipated in the night wind, while the sky that had been clear and boundless under the sun was now cloaked in dark clouds. A few fat raindrops pattered down, followed seconds later by a sudden violent downpour, as if the heavens themselves could no longer bear the heat and had sent rain to scour the filth from the world.

Li Xiong had lost track of Lei Jingzhe in the dark; he circled the forest for a long time before he finally heard the faint clash of fighting through the rain. He followed the sound, brushing aside wet branches and leaves as he trampled through fresh mud. The moment he tumbled out of the trees, he came face to face with the Imperial Army brandishing their blades. He was unarmed, yet when he saw Lei Jingzhe at a disadvantage, fighting under that curtain of rain, he bellowed in desperation; in the next moment, he had turned and wrapped his arms around a withered tree trunk as thick as his calf. With a single motion, he pulled it up out of the ground like a club.

"Dage!" Charging like a raging bull, with unchecked strength, Li Xiong swung the tree, sending one side of the Imperial Army scattering in

disarray.

Xiao Chiye hadn't expected Li Xiong to possess such power. Caught off guard, he ducked out of the trajectory of the tree trunk Li Xiong was brandishing. Lei Jingzhe, sporting a fresh blade wound, saw his opportunity and rushed back to Li Xiong's side. Li Xiong's extraordinary strength was innate, and even more frightening than Xiao Chiye's. Swinging the tree to ward off blades and swords, the boy shouted, "Ge, I'll carry you on my back!"

Lei Jingzhe jumped onto Li Xiong's back. Pointing the tree trunk before him like a sword, Li Xiong bellowed and charged through the soldiers that surrounded them. He did not fear the blades, nor did he fear Xiao Chiye. All newborn calves possessed such a temperament; he had eyes only for his big brother Lei Jingzhe. Li Xiong felt no pain as the blades cut into his arms. With Lei Jingzhe on his back, he knocked over the wall of people before him and broke into a mad dash through the torrential rain.

Blood dripped from Lei Jingzhe's wound with every step, dyeing Li Xiong's back red. Li Xiong wiped rain from his face and sobbed. "Ge! Don't die!"

Lei Jingzhe was not a man who would resign himself to his fate. He had not had a pleasant time back in the Zhu Clan in Duanzhou. His father had spurned his mother, so he discarded his surname and renamed himself Lei Jingzhe. He had run into danger many times on Mount Luo, yet he had always been able to wait it out until things took a turn for the better. But Xiao Chiye was like the sudden rain on this night, the precipice he had never seen in front of him. He didn't—couldn't—believe his time was up, yet, at the moment, he could only watch as the scales tipped against him.

"Damn it." Pressing a hand over his wound, Lei Jingzhe snapped, "Shut up!"

Hearing the pounding of hooves close behind him, Li Xiong sprinted with his teeth clenched and his eyes focused on the horizon. This kid was truly exceptional; even ordinary horses couldn't catch up to him as he ran. But Xiao Chiye's Snowcrest was extraordinary. In the blink of an eye, the horse was hot on their tail.

Li Xiong was giving his all, but he was still a growing boy; as he leapt across the stream, his leg cramped and he lost his balance, crashing to the ground on the other side. Hissing from the pain, he dragged Lei Jingzhe up from the bank, still intending to flee with his big brother on his back.

Before he could, Lei Jingzhe called out, “Xiao Chiye!”

Knowing there was no escape, he continued, “If you’re willing to spare me, the bandits of Mount Luo will be yours to command! I still have some influence with them—I can still be of use!”

Xiao Chiye flung away the drops of blood on Wolfsfang. Snowcrest stamped its hooves twice before breaking into a gallop, streaking toward the bandit.

Lei Jingzhe twisted Li Xiong’s face around to meet his eyes and grabbed his hand. His voice changed in timbre amid his violent gasps—he desperately wanted to cheat death. The grip on Li Xiong’s hand tightened as he said, “Little Bear, kill him. Kill him!”

Young Li Xiong scraped rainwater off his face. One leg dragging behind him, he spread his arms wide and stabilized his stance as he got ready to throw himself at Snowcrest. His sturdy body trembled, yet he looked right at Xiao Chiye, then bellowed and charged straight ahead. He wrapped his arms around Snowcrest’s neck—the horse screamed—and though he knew little of martial arts, he shifted his weight in a wrestling move clearly learned from the Biansha tribes and flung Snowcrest into the muddy water.

Xiao Chiye fisted his hands in Li Xiong’s collar as Li Xiong struggled to stay upright with only one foot planted on the ground. He twisted his body, his young face scrunched in effort as he pounded on Xiao Chiye’s arms and shouted, “Ge, run!”

With Li Xiong in his grip, Xiao Chiye watched Lei Jingzhe roll down the muddy slope, but he didn’t give chase. As Li Xiong snarled and tried to bite him, Xiao Chiye grabbed the back of his neck, slamming him into the ground and burying his nose and mouth in the mud. Choking, Li Xiong struggled violently.

“Tie him up.”

It was the last thing Li Xiong heard before the backside of a blade struck him and he knew no more.

When Tantai Hu arrived on horseback a short time later, the rain had tapered off. He found Xiao Chiye wiping mud off Snowcrest's flanks. When he saw Tantai Hu, he removed the long sleeve he wore for cleaning horses and beckoned him over.

"Master," Tantai Hu said, "I'll lead the men to cut him off from the southeast. He won't get far."

Instead of agreeing, Xiao Chiye asked, "Have you rounded up all the bandits in the forest?"

Assuming Xiao Chiye wanted a headcount, Tantai Hu began to turn back to ask for the record book. But as Xiao Chiye cleaned his fingers of mud, he said, "It's fine as long as you've caught them. You don't have to show me. Go get ready. We're heading back to the city."

Tantai Hu was taken aback. Xiao Chiye had already picked up the tack to resaddle Snowcrest; Tantai Hu walked the few steps with him. "Master, if we let him go now, won't we be letting the tiger return to the mountain, ready to leap on us again later?"

Xiao Chiye wiped mud off the seat. "I'm not just letting him go, I'm planning to send him off with great fanfare. Get a few squads to follow him. He has a stab wound; don't let him die on the road. Shadow him all the way to Dunzhou. Don't worry about anything else."

Tantai Hu only had to think for a moment to grasp Xiao Chiye's intent. He grinned. "I'm off then, Master. I'll bring a few dozen men with me and escort him back to Dunzhou within three days."

Xiao Chiye looked with cool detachment in the direction Lei Jingzhe had fled. A sopping-wet Meng landed on his shoulder and preened his bloodstained feathers. Xiao Chiye grabbed the sleeve he'd used to wipe down Snowcrest to clean Meng's talons.

"Hold them up," he cooed patiently, "I'll wipe them for you. If you track mud all over Lanzhou's shoulders when we get back, I'm the one

stuck washing his robe.”

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Chapter 116:
Chen Yang

XIAO CHIYE said he would return in three days, and return in three days he did. When he arrived at Cizhou's city walls in the middle of the night, the gates were open, with torches throwing bright light over the walls above and below. The Imperial Army marched through with their captives bringing up the rear. Zhou Gui had cleared out the prison on the south side of the city for the Imperial Army's use. As he came forward to receive Xiao Chiye, he called, "Your Lordship has worked hard! The soldiers must be tired after eradicating the bandits. I had food prepared for everyone. This way, please."

Xiao Chiye dismounted. "How kind of you, Your Excellency."

Zhou Gui followed Xiao Chiye in, his smile positively radiant. "I saw General Tantai's report about the bandits you took captive in the east. You've broken them up! I heard Your Lordship personally went after Lei Jingzhe. This is truly—truly marvelous!"

Xiao Chiye had caught sight of Shen Zechuan in the crowd, and Shen Zechuan had spotted Xiao Chiye. A few personal guards followed at Shen Zechuan's heels, with Qiao Tianya beside him holding a lantern; they had clearly been waiting a long time. Still addressing Zhou Gui, Xiao Chiye said, "We'll have a detailed discussion regarding Lei Jingzhe in Your Excellency's study tomorrow morning."

Assuming Xiao Chiye was tired from his journey, Zhou Gui nodded briskly. "Of course."

Kong Ling, the more perceptive of the two, could see they were getting in the way, even if he wasn't accustomed to such relationships. He made some excuses and shepherded Zhou Gui away.

Chen Yang stepped forward from among the waiting soldiers to take Snowcrest as the guards behind him all bent the knee and exclaimed, "Congratulations to Master on your triumphant return!"

Xiao Chiye loosened his armguards and unslung the Conqueror Bow from his back. “Rise, all of you. Have you been waiting long?”

Shen Zechuan took the lantern from Qiao Tianya and turned to walk with Xiao Chiye down the street. “A while.”

Xiao Chiye reached out and plucked the lantern from Shen Zechuan’s fingers, while Shen Zechuan took Xiao Chiye’s armguards and turned them over in his hands. Xiao Chiye explained, “Those are an old relic from a few years back. The metal parts were cast in Libei, and the leather straps on top are made of the same material Qudu supplies to the Eight Great Battalions. The straps came apart from chafing when I drew the Conqueror Bow last time. I’ll have to find some way to replace them before I return to Libei.”

The leather straps used for fastening the armguards had indeed worn thin. Shen Zechuan plucked at them a few times and said to Qiao Tianya, “Take these back.”

Noting that Shen Zechuan was leading them in the opposite direction of the Zhou manor, Xiao Chiye couldn’t help but glance back. He looked at Shen Zechuan and asked, “Did we move out?”

“Of course. We have to.” Shen Zechuan ascended the steps in front of them. “We can’t impose on Zhou Gui forever. He gained a grandson at the beginning of the year, and as long as we’re there, his entire family is crammed into two courtyards. It’s too much to ask of them. I had someone make inquiries a few days ago, and this manor here happened to catch my eye.”

As he spoke, the two of them stepped into a wide alley. Xiao Chiye looked down the slabstone path that led to the front door. “It’s right off the main street and close to Zhou Gui’s place, so it’ll be easy to go back and forth. You’ve chosen an excellent location.”

“There’s one drawback,” Shen Zechuan said as he led Xiao Chiye across the threshold. “It’s too big. We can’t fill these courtyards even if we gather all the men we have.”

Xiao Chiye saw a mounting block of stacked brick set up just outside the door. The carved wooden door pillars were elegantly spare, their patterns not as busy and meticulous as those in Qudu and Juexi, but instead

reminiscent of the style favored by Libei and Biansha. A manor with five courtyards really was far too large for the two of them. It was nearly the same size as the manor Qi Huilian had been bestowed by the throne when he was still Grand Mentor of the Eastern Palace. Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan had neither heirs nor concubines; they wouldn't be able to fill it up even if they acquired new servants. The stone walls were worn with age, but the double-eaved roof cut an imposing sight without obstructing light. All of it was just the way Xiao Chiye liked it.

"That's no issue." Xiao Chiye took Shen Zechuan's hand as he stepped through the door. "Shifu can take one courtyard; you and I take another. The others can share a courtyard, and if more people join us in the future, we can allocate them according to status. By the time we're seventy or eighty, we'll no doubt see every room filled."

"The back courtyard can stay empty," Shen Zechuan said, "but we'll need men in the rear yard and the side room that's flanking the central room. The courtyards are all connected, so we'll need someone always keeping watch. It'll make shift changes a little harder."

As they toured the residence discussing everything they'd need, Ding Tao walked behind them, recording the various routes in his book. "This manor isn't as big as our prince's manor in Qudu," he whispered, "but it's way more confusing. If I live back here, it'll take me half a month just to remember the way."

"What are you afraid of? We don't let you take missions alone, and you always have Gu Jin to lead the way if you get lost." Qiao Tianya looked around. "This manor wasn't cheap, but my master didn't even blink at the price. How deep are his pockets?"

Brow creased in a sorrowful expression, Ding Tao added a few more strokes to the page. "You don't understand. It's precisely because Jin-ge is leading the way that we'll get lost. Ay, Jin-ge's an odd one. As a scout, he can remember any unfamiliar place with perfect clarity, but when he returns home, it's a different story. Nine times out of ten, he'll turn the wrong way. Back in Libei, he used to wander to another courtyard all the time. I'm telling you, there's a girl there called Cuilan, a maidservant for the heir

consort. She’s really gentle. Every time Jin-ge made a wrong turn, she’d be the one who led him back. She even gave me candy. In any case—hmrph!”

Gu Jin hooked an arm around Ding Tao, clapping his mouth shut. Casting a glance at Qiao Tianya, he quipped, “Hear no evil.”

Qiao Tianya looked at him in astonishment and applauded softly. “I haven’t heard anything that’s ‘evil.’ Rather, you’ve just given up the game.”

“It’ll be hard to grow bamboo here,” Xiao Chiye was saying. “I’ll look for something else in a few days.” He glanced back at the guards. “Who’s on watch tonight?”

Chen Yang had seemed preoccupied all this while, but now he promptly answered, “Just me. The rest of them have been taking shifts on duty these last few days.”

Xiao Chiye knew Chen Yang had something to report to him—he’d sensed it the moment he saw Chen Yang’s expression at the gates. He nodded and didn’t probe further.

The bath was ready when they returned to the main courtyard. While Xiao Chiye washed off the dust of the road, Shen Zechuan sent word for their meal to be warmed.

The weather was still hot, and the doors to the main room were wide open, with bamboo blinds hung to keep out mosquitoes. All the window screens had been newly replaced, and on the veranda sat a round-bellied copper basin that housed two red carp and three or four lotuses. The fresh green plants in the courtyard were washed in the warm lamplight from the windows. Chen Yang sat in their midst, somewhat dazed.

He was dressed in an old robe. All their clothes were worn from their rushed journey here. Shen Zechuan had asked Zhou Gui’s wife for a tailor to take their measurements one by one; soon, they would all have new clothes to wear.

Chen Yang and Zhao Hui were the same age, yet Zhao Hui already had a family and an established career, while Chen Yang was still the chief of Xiao Chiye’s personal guards and lived together with the other brothers. He appeared the most self-possessed among them, but in truth, he remained

rough around the edges. At present, he was sitting under the eaves acquiring quite a number of mosquito bites, anxiously deliberating how he should report to Xiao Chiye.

The bamboo blinds lifted halfway; Shen Zechuan, already in his leisure robes, called out: “You’ve been standing guard outside the city wall every night, and now you’re sitting here feeding the mosquitoes. Come in and have dinner with Ce’an.”

Chen Yang rose and followed him inside.

Xiao Chiye had yet to finish bathing, but the meal was laid out and awaiting him. It was simple fare; the two of them rarely called for lavish spreads. Now that Ji Gang was back, he kept close watch on their food. All the proper ingredients to be used and extra nourishment to be taken were prepared according to the recipes he and Qi Huilian had developed back at the Temple of Guilt. This group of personal guards loved to drink, as had Ji Gang in the past, and the dishes he made to accompany wine were second to none.

Chen Yang knelt on the mat while a maidservant set dishes on the small table in front of him.

It was quiet in the room. Chen Yang sat with his head lowered and listened as the attendants withdrew. Shen Zechuan took the master’s seat. In contrast to Chen Yang’s restraint, he was dressed casually: The loose, white robe he wore shifted with his movements and revealed his wrists, diminishing some of the remoteness of his exquisite appearance; like this, there was a relaxing and unpretentious quality to him.

When two people spent a long time in each other’s company, perhaps they influenced each other subconsciously. In this moment, Shen Zechuan felt to Chen Yang like Xiao Chiye when he was quiet—that aura that gradually put one at ease.

“Worrying too much won’t do you any good.” Shen Zechuan set down his wooden chopsticks and said, without looking at Chen Yang, “Report the facts, with neither embellishment nor amendment. Tell it to him as it happened. He will naturally have his own interpretation. It’s often said that those most deeply involved in the matter lack the perspective to see the

whole picture, but that may not necessarily be so. As the one concerned, he understands it far better than anyone else. Perhaps he even thought of this before you ever did."

Without raising his head, Chen Yang bowed to him in silence.

"If you underestimate him, then you underestimate yourself," Shen Zechuan continued placidly. "He chose each of you out of thousands, but didn't you also choose him? There will still be violent storms to brave and turbulent seas to navigate in the future. If you continue to vacillate like this at each turn, then, sooner or later, you won't be able to match his pace. They only know Xiao Chiye as he was six years ago; you've seen a Xiao Chiye who has been tempered and sharpened over those same six years. Chen Yang, *morning sun*, and Zhao Hui, *rays of dawn*—both of you are named for the light of the sun, and Xiao Chiye and Xiao Jiming are both wolves of Libei. What are you afraid of? Don't let your time in Qudu confuse you. All of you have long been evenly matched."

Though Chen Yang pressed his face into the mat, an indistinct sob escaped his throat and his fingers curled slightly. He said nothing for a long while. He thought his own circumstances were of no importance, so he had never mentioned his heartbreak. Although he hadn't suffered a gross injustice as Gu Jin had, he still recognized the cold treatment he had received back home. It had been a relief to leave Libei beside Gu Jin. He had been tossing and turning these past few days precisely because he didn't know how to bring this up with Xiao Chiye.

Years ago, when Chen Yang had left Libei for the first time, he was in no way inferior to Zhao Hui. He always tried to do his best in everything—he was most afraid of being perceived as lesser than Zhao Hui, and so he kept raising the bar for himself. But in the half month he had spent back home, he had done his best to avoid Zhao Hui entirely.

He was afraid. At some point, he began to feel that he had already lost.

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Chen Yang was Xiao Chiye's trusted aide, and one point of many on which outsiders would compare the brothers Xiao Chiye and Xiao Jiming. The moment he was overtaken by such a fear, those under him—such as Gu Jin and Ding Tao—would inevitably feel its effects. If their own chief saw them as low, how could they stand on equal footing with Xiao Jiming's guards? More than anything else, this would be the real blow to Xiao Chiye, who was about to find himself under the harsh scrutiny of Libei.

Xiao Chiye was not anyone else—not Xiao Fangxu, not Xiao Jiming. He was only himself. His most arrogant traits were his fearlessness in forging ahead and his determination to win. For Chen Yang, following him was akin to chasing after the wind in a tempest. Shen Zechuan was right. If Chen Yang felt fear now, then sooner or later, he would be left behind. The one he had chosen at the very beginning was indeed the young Xiao Chiye, who'd had the guts to remain alone as a hostage in Qudu.

Hair still damp, Xiao Chiye appeared in the main room, his leisure robes draped around him. He was taken aback at the sight of Chen Yang bent over the ground, shoulders trembling. Yet when he looked at Shen Zechuan, he merely spread his hands and gave Xiao Chiye an innocent look.

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Chapter 117:
Favor and Intimidation

XIAO CHIYE'S LOOSE outer robe fell casually open, exposing the unfastened collar of his inner garment. When he settled before the low table, his figure obstructed most of the lamplight. His skin was still damp, but after wiping his face with a clean handkerchief, he felt more comfortable. Tapping a finger thrice on the floor, he said to Chen Yang, "What's the matter? Straighten your back and spit it out."

Chen Yang scrubbed his face with his sleeve and sat up straight. "We encountered some difficulties when we returned to Libei. I wouldn't presume to make any judgment, so I'm reporting it to Master first."

Xiao Chiye picked up Shen Zechuan's chopsticks and began to eat, listening as Chen Yang recounted what had happened. Midway through his recitation, Shen Zechuan excused himself from the table to take his own bath. When Xiao Chiye finished the rice in his bowl, he sat for a moment without reaching for anything else.

"How is Gu Jin's injury?" he asked at last.

"We called for a physician right after we left the camp. Gu Jin's fever broke during the journey, but the wound on his back is in a bad state. Ji Gang-shifu took a look at it last night. He told Gu Jin to abstain from certain foods and left him with some instructions, but said he'd recover with a month's rest." Chen Yang paused. "Fortunately, his eyes and ears were unharmed."

Xiao Chiye had gathered plenty from Chen Yang's plainly worded statements. "Tudalung Banner is patrolled daily by Base Camp in the eastern mountain range. It was originally quite a distance away from the stomping grounds of the Hanma tribe, but Gu Jin's vanguard squad retreated there. This means the Libei Armored Cavalry has been pushed back considerably. My father and Shifu's battles aren't going smoothly."

Through the bamboo blinds came the cacophony of insects in the summer night.

Xiao Chiye gazed into the candle flame. “Dage’s inability to lead the troops is a heavy blow to the Libei Armored Cavalry,” he murmured. “My old man came out of retirement so quickly because he had to boost the troops’ plummeting morale and soften the impact of the word *defeat*. But he hasn’t stepped on the battlefield in person for almost fifteen years. Meanwhile, for those fifteen years, his opponent, Amur, has never left the front lines with the Hanma tribe. Times have changed. Relying blindly on my father is not the path to victory. I often say there shouldn’t be a change in personnel right before a battle. Even the most skilled general builds rapport with his soldiers over time. All of my father’s subordinates from fifteen years ago have been replaced, and those who could return to the field beside him are few and far between. The troops he’s leading now belong to a new school of officers and soldiers who are used to Dage’s style of command. Both sides need to adapt to the other at such a critical time—it’s no easy feat.”

When Xiao Fangxu had established the Libei Armored Cavalry, those words—*armored cavalry*—were the best description of Libei’s forces. In those days, Libei had been unable to keep pace with the mounts of the Biansha Horsemen. Xiao Fangxu had responded by making their cavalry heavier: He not only equipped the soldiers in full armor; he also armored the horses of Libei. An army like this was a terrifying vision in a direct frontal assault. Like a mighty river rushing down a mountain, any collision could annihilate their foes on impact. There was no time for the Biansha Horsemen to draw their scimitars before the horses of Libei were upon them, and even if they managed it, they couldn’t pierce that armor. Not even the ferocious Hanma tribe was willing to wage a drawn-out war with the armored cavalry; their light and swift mobility was their only remaining advantage. Xiao Fangxu had continued building on this foundation, piling more weight on the Libei Armored Cavalry until he eventually forged the army into a genuine wall of iron.

When Qi Zhuyin led the Qidong Garrison Troops through the five commanderies, their horses’ hooves boomed like thunder. Yet the approach of the Libei Armored Cavalry was not merely thunder, but an earthquake. The sound alone sapped their enemies’ courage. For five or six years, no one could find any weakness in the Libei Armored Cavalry.

However, Amur of the Hanma tribe was also a fearless warrior who, through constant engagement with the Libei Armored Cavalry, soon learned how to turn their weight to his advantage. As long as the Hanma tribe's horses were swift enough, they could loot, retreat, disperse, circle back, and surround their foe once again. They were like a swarm of blood-sucking flies: Though they couldn't penetrate that solid and sturdy armor, they emerged from their battles unscathed. When Lei Jingzhe had gathered his own bandits together to harass the Imperial Army, he had imitated the Hanma tribe's tactics against the Libei Armored Cavalry—unfortunately, he didn't have horses that fast, nor soldiers that strong.

It was around this time that Xiao Jiming took command of the Libei Armored Cavalry. The first decision he faced was whether to retain the heft of the Libei Armored Cavalry's armor and weaponry. In the eyes of his father's generals, he was a greenhorn, still wet behind the ears, and his refined and humble personality was something these veterans, used to Xiao Fangxu's brash style, found hard to accept. He made a completely different decision than his father: He reduced the weight of the Libei Armored Cavalry, thinning that wall of iron but allowing them more maneuverability. With this, the Libei Armored Cavalry shifted from a heavy cavalry into a cavalry only slightly more armored than the standard.

Under Xiao Jiming, Libei became newly characterized by their speed. Hence came the moniker *Iron Horse on River Ice*—for this was also the fundamental reason he was able to gallop across the borders of two territories in a single night. Xiao Jiming's cavalry could match the Hanma tribe's speed, and coupled with the continued refinement of their battle formations, they became tougher to deal with than they'd been even under Xiao Fangxu. This new school of generals were all hand-picked by Xiao Jiming. Their style was compatible with Xiao Jiming's, and they were used to working with a commander who was receptive to their suggestions. They might respect Xiao Fangxu greatly, but they couldn't necessarily adapt to fighting under him.

Respect alone did not win battles. The light in their eyes as they gazed up at that legendary god of war would inevitably dull as he and his officers butted heads. In the end, the glorious Prince of Libei would fall

from his pedestal, fading slowly into obscurity before being washed away in the tides of change. When that time came, the legend of the Libei Armored Cavalry would also come to its end. They would become no more than a mob of disorganized soldiers plagued by internal discord. The armored cavalry's dependence on centralized command was its advantage, but it was also to its detriment.

Out of all commanders in the Zhou empire, Qi Zhuyin had studied the Libei Armored Cavalry most closely. She was well-aware of the drawbacks inherent in the Libei Armored Cavalry's over-reliance on its commander in chief. After she became the grand marshal of the Five Commanderies Garrison Troops, she had tried her best to avoid leading Qidong down the same path. She put considerable effort into establishing the Qidong generals' barracks, which took in men with the potential to lead. Her confidence in her absolute hold over military authority gave her the ability to delegate power. She allowed Lu Guangbai so much authority because Lu Guangbai was capable. Moreover, she understood what kind of generals were suitable to lead which troops. In Xiao Chiye's eyes, Qi Zhuyin was the most qualified person in his generation to hold the position of Qidong's grand marshal.

Anyone who acquitted themselves well on the battlefield could become the general of an army, but few had what it took to be a grand marshal, commanding multiple armies from all quarters. If one were to rank the present Four Great Generals of the empire, Qi Zhuyin would no doubt be placed at the top. She had discerned the Libei Armored Cavalry's greatest weakness long ago, and had reminded Xiao Jiming of it.

Xiao Chiye's ostracization was inevitable.

With a hand on his knee, Xiao Chiye poured off the melted candle wax into a small porcelain plate. It touched the tips of his fingers, but he liked this kind of searing pain. He watched as the flame flickered. "Chen Yang, when I left Libei at seventeen, I asked my sister-in-law when I would be able to return home. My question brought tears to her eyes, and she cried in her room the whole night through. When my brother and I mounted our horses the next morning, she stuffed so many cakes from Libei into my bundle it was bursting, and even hid a flask of On Horseback inside. She

said she didn’t know when I would be able to return either, but that they would always be waiting for me in Libei.

“I entered the capital as a hostage, all because Dage won a battle. I hated Shen Wei to the core. At the time, I thought the fall of Zhongbo was to blame for my imprisonment. I never thought myself any better than my brother, but like him, I was attached to the Hongyan Mountains and the stables. I used to lie on the grass and listen to the sounds from the earth under my ear. When I left, I wanted to take the very soil of Libei with me.

“Once, I went to the top of the tallest tower in Qudu and looked toward the horizon, hoping for a glimpse of Libei. But not even Meng could see the mountains of our homeland when he flew up into the clouds. I understood then, for the first time, how remote a possibility it was that I could return home. I learned all sorts of things from Shifu, but it was only in Qudu that I began to understand the truths behind his teachings. I’m a man of ambition, and Qudu is the instructor that taught me to restrain that desire. My encounter with Lanzhou was no accident. He was the last line of defense that kept me from reaching my breaking point, as well as the indulgence and freedom I’ve regained.”

Xiao Chiye sketched a finger through the air, as if drawing a line.

“I’m complete now. The parts of me that were broken, that were lacking, are encased with steel. Now that I’ve left Qudu, I don’t plan to stop. Twenty years ago, ten years ago, my father and brother both made the best choice they could at the time. Today, it’s my turn. The challenges we face may not always be from our enemies. I acknowledge the excellence of my father and brother; I cherish and revere them, but that sentiment is reserved for the part of them that’s family, not the part that commands the Libei Armored Cavalry. You and I are wolves that have strayed from the pack. We return now not to submit to the will of others, but to claim our rightful places.”

Xiao Chiye leaned closer, his gaze as sharp as a blade. “Libei cannot suffer another defeat. This concerns more than just the Xiao Clan. I understand that, as do my old man and Dage. Who should inherit Libei’s iron wall? Anyone can—as long as they can shoulder the responsibility. I’m not simply going home; I’m going back to *Libei*. Guo Weili is a seasoned

general; he knows better than anyone your positions and duties. Not injuring Gu Jin's eyes and ears was his most merciful warning to me. So pull yourself together, Chen Yang. Our opponents are all hardened veterans who have seen countless battles—but no battle in this world is fated to be lost before it's begun. All those impregnable defenses and impenetrable encirclements are only a facade. I'm going back, and I want to go back to a Libei Armored Cavalry that truly belongs to me."

Chen Yang's fingertips trembled. He had knelt until both his legs were numb, but now that tingling sensation shot up his spine. In the face of this Xiao Chiye, his fear was swept away by the fervor coursing through his blood.

By the time Shen Zechuan emerged from his bath, Chen Yang had taken his leave. Xiao Chiye was lying on the settee by the window, staring into space. The window was ajar, and the delicate fragrance of lotus blossoms outside wafted into the room. Head pillowed on one arm, Xiao Chiye looked up through the gap at the starry sky.

Shen Zechuan blew out the candle and tossed his outer robe over the back of a chair. He drew an icy-cold finger across Xiao Chiye's cheek, tracing a trail of thrilling heat.

Xiao Chiye had missed Shen Zechuan too much; every inch of him, he longed for with deep urgency. Behind his fatigue thrummed an irrepressible anticipation. Though he had been on horseback for days, sleep was suddenly impossible. The fierce possessiveness in his eyes was a thing understood only by the two of them, and it sharpened quickly at the brush of Shen Zechuan's finger.

Absence, it was said, made the heart fonder. In the near future, there would be countless such absences. For now, Xiao Chiye wanted to consume every single moment they had alone together. He wanted to invade Shen Zechuan, to have him every possible way and drive deep into him again and again, leaving his own scent behind while Shen Zechuan's enveloped him completely.

Perhaps there were many ways to express love. But at this moment, they desired only the most intense.

The settee wasn't big enough for both of them. Xiao Chiye reached a hand up to pull down the bamboo blinds and cover the window. His Lanzhou didn't need the moonlight looking in. That lithe softness, exposed to air, needed only one gaze upon it—Xiao Chiye's.

Shen Zechuan straddled Xiao Chiye as they kissed in the darkness. Their hot breaths mingled, heat spreading down their necks, then their chests, until even their abdomens burned. Shen Zechuan's neck was flushed, and Xiao Chiye took this for silent acclamation. Like Shen Zechuan's small tremors, these were unconscious reactions he couldn't suppress.

The force of Xiao Chiye's desire made Shen Zechuan raise his head and gasp for air. Shen Zechuan pressed a palm to Xiao Chiye's chest, attempting to stop his aggressive advance, but the gleam of tears in his eyes beneath lowered lashes only seduced Xiao Chiye, goading him to unleash his ferocity and indulge his cruelty.

Do anything you want.

This was what Shen Zechuan's eyes announced to him.

Xiao Chiye surged up and held Shen Zechuan securely atop him. Neither of them averted their eyes as their breathing became ragged. Wracked by wave after wave of shivers amid Xiao Chiye's merciless assault, Shen Zechuan's loose hair spilled over his shoulders as he grasped at Xiao Chiye's clothes, crushing the fabric in his fists.

"You need a little more flesh on you," Xiao Chiye rasped, "Lanzhou."

Damp strands of hair stuck to Shen Zechuan's face. For a moment, he couldn't find his voice. Sighs tumbled from his lips as he reached out to steady himself on the settee, but Xiao Chiye took hold of his hands. He didn't wait for Shen Zechuan to get his bearings before entering him again with languid tenderness—a slow, gentle rock after a tumultuous and satisfying ride.

Or so it would have been, if he hadn’t thrust so deep.

Shen Zechuan let Xiao Chiye keep him in this position as he took all of him, his mind reduced to mush in this unforgiving onslaught. His eyes, misty and half-lidded, became a still more potent aphrodisiac to the one beneath him, his lashes glistening with evidence of pleasure as Xiao Chiye pressed into every part of him.

“Ce’an.” Shen Zechuan murmured whichever name came to mind. “A-Ye.”

Xiao Chiye’s brow was damp with exertion. Shen Zechuan dipped his head and nudged along Xiao Chiye’s temple with the tip of his nose to disperse those beads of sweat. Wickedly, he called out, “Er-lang.”

Xiao Chiye stopped. He grasped Shen Zechuan’s jaw and tilted his face up, then kissed him hard between gasps. Those calls threw the last of his control into disarray, dispelling all those secret anxieties. Xiao Chiye forgot them all. He needed nothing else—only Shen Zechuan.

They couldn’t indulge to their heart’s content on the settee; at some point, the bedding was pulled down from the bed onto the carpeted floor. Even the pillows were drenched by the time they were sated. Shen Zechuan’s eyes drifted closed. He was soaked to the bone, utterly spent. Xiao Chiye levered himself up on his sturdy arms, still sheathed inside him as he pressed his forehead to Shen Zechuan’s and panted lightly for breath.

“Lanzhou.” Xiao Chiye’s sweat-sheened forehead slid down to Shen Zechuan’s jaw and nuzzled into the crook of his neck. He repeated, muffled, “Lanzhou.”

Shen Zechuan laid a hand on Xiao Chiye’s hair. They clung so close as to be inseparable, fitting together like notes in perfect harmony. Shen Zechuan shifted his legs, motioning for Xiao Chiye to lie down on top of him. Instead, Xiao Chiye tightened his arms around his waist, his embrace so desperate Shen Zechuan found it hard to breathe. He ruffled the back of Xiao Chiye’s head and breathed a light puff of air into Xiao Chiye’s ear. “Little wolf pup,” he called.

Xiao Chiye bit him.

Shen Zechuan let out a husky laugh. Sensing wetness trickling out of him, he said, “It’s leaking out.”

Xiao Chiye turned the bite into a kiss. They ground against each other, slippery with the evidence of their passion. It seemed Xiao Chiye’s desire would rear its head once more, drawing soft sighs from Shen Zechuan. Thinking he had been treating Shen Zechuan too roughly, Xiao Chiye had intended to stop for the night—but after one look at the glint in Shen Zechuan’s eyes, he drove back into him instead.

He stroked Shen Zechuan’s cheek and slipped two fingers into his mouth, gently pinning Shen Zechuan’s tongue. They entwined their limbs, panting in unison as they studied each other’s reactions. This time, their lovemaking was less frenzied than their first coupling, an endless, tender embrace.

When Xiao Chiye finally slid out of him, Shen Zechuan could no longer make a single sound; all his wordless moans had been devoured. He grasped Xiao Chiye’s jaw to bring him closer as the waves of heat broke over him. Tears he couldn’t hold back soaked the hair at his temples. Xiao Chiye finally lowered his body to press against him, skin on skin.

They were both exhausted, and Shen Zechuan could barely keep his eyes open. Yet his hand still cradled Xiao Chiye’s jaw. Xiao Chiye let out a quiet laugh as he leaned down to capture his lips once more. They kissed for a moment, then fell asleep together at last, Xiao Chiye draped over Shen Zechuan.

Xiao Chiye sank into a dreamless slumber.

They woke after sunrise the next day, later than usual. Xiao Chiye had just returned from chasing bandits; no one would have castigated him for resting, but he still rose quickly. Their lovemaking had provided an outlet for the emotions he might otherwise have suppressed. Feeling Xiao Chiye stir, Shen Zechuan made to get up too, but Xiao Chiye covered him with the quilt and kissed him back onto the bed.

“The garrison troops.” Shen Zechuan struggled half-heartedly, heavy with sleep in the dim light, his eyes still closed. “I’ll go later, in the

afternoon…”

“We’ll discuss Cizhou’s garrison troops later,” Xiao Chiye said. “I want to settle the Lei Jingzhe issue with Zhou Gui first.”

“Two hours.” Shen Zechuan sighed. “I’ll be there in two hours.”

Xiao Chiye caressed his cheek. “It doesn’t matter even if you go tomorrow. There’s no hurry to get it done in the next few days. Go back to sleep; I’ll be back for lunch at noon. Tell Shifu to come too.”

Shen Zechuan murmured in acknowledgment, though it wasn’t clear if he’d heard anything Xiao Chiye said.

After a bath, Xiao Chiye changed into fresh robes. He didn’t call for anyone to go in and tidy the room, but instructed Ding Tao and Gu Jin to stand guard in the courtyard and wait for Shen Zechuan to rise. Then he left, taking Chen Yang and Qiao Tianya with him.

Zhou Gui was in his study, deep in discussion with his advisors. When he saw Xiao Chiye had arrived at last, he hurried out to greet him and dismissed the rest, leaving only Kong Ling in the room to serve tea.

Xiao Chiye appeared sterner than usual today, all his supposed youthful frivolity entirely absent. Standing in the doorway, he cut such an intimidating figure that Zhou Gui and Kong Ling didn’t even dare breathe too deeply as he strode in. He clearly had something on his mind and got to the point almost as soon as he took his seat.

“I let Lei Jingzhe flee east. I expect he’ll make it to Dunzhou within three days.”

Kong Ling had done a headcount of the bandits the night before and had grown uneasy when he found Lei Jingzhe was not among them. Hearing this, however, dispelled his misgivings. He considered them to be on familiar terms with Xiao Chiye by now, so there was no need to be as reserved as before. He coughed lightly. “Presumably Your Lordship has your own plans.”

Zhou Gui still had doubts. “Lei Jingzhe is a conniving character. Since you’ve let him go, does Your Lordship plan to keep him for your own

use?”

“That man is too shrewd to submit to anyone.” There was no warmth in Xiao Chiye’s eyes. “Though we’ve captured the majority of the men Lei Jingzhe brought with him to Cizhou, he still has men loyal to him on Mount Luo. In any case, even if we dispose of one Lei Jingzhe, there are plenty more like him. Eradicating them all before Cizhou builds its own garrison troops would be next to impossible.”

Kong Ling thought back to what Shen Zechuan had said a few days ago and nodded. “That’s right. It’s just as the vice commander said—as long as food remains scarce in Zhongbo, there will be ordinary folk who turn to banditry. There’s no way to solve the problem with force alone.”

“Lei Jingzhe lost several of his most trusted men and escaped by himself. Even if he has a silver tongue, he’ll be hard-pressed to clear himself of suspicion among his fellow bandits,” Xiao Chiye said. “I’m going to give him a helping hand—I’ll turn him into a spy for the Imperial Army, a man so hated all the bandits of Dunzhou and Duanzhou revolt against him. Lei Jingzhe is no fool; he won’t sit still and wait for death. Whatever action he takes, the bandits will be thrown into disarray and too preoccupied with infighting to set their sights on Cizhou again anytime soon.”

“Your Lordship has made all these plans with Cizhou’s future in mind,” Kong Ling observed. “Is it because you are preparing to set off for Libei?”

Xiao Chiye turned his teacup around. “Time waits for no man. Libei is waging a war against Biansha; I shouldn’t remain in Cizhou any longer. Moreover, Qidong has delayed making any move against us for two months already. Once Qi Zhuyin arrives, it will be hard for me to leave even if I want to. After I go, Lanzhou will continue working hard to help Cizhou. As I said before when I set out with the troops—I won’t poke my nose into anything concerning the garrison troops of Cizhou. But if you have need of the Imperial Army, just ask Lanzhou to send me notice; I’ll be sure to arrive within a day.”

This statement was certainly worth pondering. At the very least, to Kong Ling’s ears, it sounded like both a favor and a threat.

Xiao Chiye said they should ask Shen Zechuan to inform him—this implied he wouldn’t heed any requests from Cizhou alone. Shen Zechuan would be the one to decide whether or not Xiao Chiye led his troops back. However, Shen Zechuan wasn’t someone who could be easily fooled; Cizhou couldn’t take advantage of the distance to deceive the Imperial Army into deploying troops to aid them.

Yet beneath that, Kong Ling sensed another layer of meaning. Unsettled, he wiped sweat from his brow.

The message was this: If Cizhou dared lay a hand on Shen Zechuan, Xiao Chiye would be at their gates within a day.

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Chapter 118:
Past Affairs

NOT DARING to grouse even to himself for fear Xiao Chiye might sense something amiss, Kong Ling dabbed at his brow and took a sip of tea in an attempt to cover his discomfort, an action that only made it more conspicuous. He nodded. “Your Lordship is returning to Libei to defend our borders against the Biansha tribes; Cizhou couldn’t possibly trouble the Imperial Army any more than it has. In any event, with the vice commander here, even if Lei Jingzhe makes another attempt on the city, he is sure to fail.”

Zhou Gui, who hadn’t gotten the hint, simply said, “The march of an army over long distances is beset with difficulties. We’re here to the south of Libei precisely so we can watch Libei’s back. If Cizhou can be of any use to Your Lordship in the future, only say the word, and we will do our best to assist. As for the bandits we’ve taken into custody, how does Your Lordship wish to deal with them?”

“Several of the men we captured were once bandit chiefs in their own right on Mount Luo. They won’t do us much good dead, so we may as well release them alongside Lei Jingzhe.” Xiao Chiye already had a plan in mind. “Earlier, I bribed a few of the bandits to spread the rumor that Lei Jingzhe had been released by the Imperial Army. In half a month, we’ll let them break out of prison and flee with those men, Ding Niu and Liu-er. Cizhou need only send enough soldiers in pursuit to drive them back to Dunzhou. Plenty of their own had died under the swords of the Imperial Army. Once they conclude that the Imperial Army cut them off in the east due to a leak from Lei Jingzhe, they’ll want their revenge.”

Zhou Gui and Kong Ling nodded in unison. Knowing Xiao Chiye would return to Libei soon, Zhou Gui determined they must discuss the matter of military provisions while he was still here. During their discussion a few days ago, Shen Zechuan had firmly turned down their offer of additional provisions for the Imperial Army next year.

Facing Xiao Chiye, Zhou Gui deliberated over his next words. “Cizhou originally planned to provide the Imperial Army an allowance of sixteen thousand dan of grain after spring of next year. We know this is a small amount, but it’s a token of appreciation from Cizhou to Your Lordship. When I told the vice commander of this, he said he sympathized with Cizhou’s difficulties and urged us to instead sell the grain at a good price to Chazhou, then use the money to fund the reconstruction of our defenses. We’ve thought it over the past few days, and we still feel we must show our gratitude. Your Lordship, there is a piece of vacant land to the northwest of Cizhou. It’s the former site of the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds. Initially, we planned to till this land and plant crops, but the soil wasn’t good enough for rice; all we could sow were some vegetable seeds. Rather than continue to leave it fallow, we thought it’d be better to gift it to Your Lordship to turn into a field for horses or to build a new military camp, as you wish.”

The imperial family’s use of the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds preceded that of the Nanlin Hunting Grounds. As Xiao Fangxu had risen to prominence in the north, the imperial family opted to change the venue of the Autumn Hunt to a locale closer to Qudu, where they could feel more at ease. The Beiyuan Hunting Grounds encompassed no small area—in total, they were even larger than Xiao Chiye’s spacious military drill grounds at Mount Feng. This land was far enough west to pose a threat to Dancheng and close enough to Cizhou to provide support to the city; not to mention it sat just outside the boundaries of Libei. It was an excellent position from which to advance and retreat.

Xiao Chiye’s interest was piqued. He was wary of the Qidong Garrison Troops to the south, especially with Shen Zechuan remaining behind in Zhongbo. Without a place en route to anchor his troops, he would have to rush back and forth between Libei and Cizhou. Never mind him alone, if he ran around like that with tens of thousands of men in tow, not only would he expose their position, he’d draw unwanted attention from all sides.

But Xiao Chiye was broke. He had scrimped and saved to build the military drill grounds at Mount Feng, which, while not as imposing as the

Eight Great Battalions' grounds, had cost him a pretty penny all the same. His noble title was all but useless now, and there was no one to pay him a salary. His manors in Qudu were no more than faraway piles of brick and timber. Even digging a handful of copper coins out of his pockets would prove difficult for him at present.

The little jade bead earring Shen Zechuan was currently wearing on his right ear had been hand-polished by Xiao Chiye himself. In the past, Xiao Chiye wouldn't have flinched at losing an ivory fan or two. Yet now, seeing that Lanzhou's little bamboo fan had been stained, and having promised to replace it, he was already thinking of making it himself.

Since Xiao Chiye had yet to say a word, Zhou Gui thought the offer was not to his liking. He added, "The place is big. Although it was used for hunting in the past, I'm afraid it's fallen into disrepair over the years, and the servants have long run away. But the perimeter wall still appears to be solid. If Your Lordship takes charge of it, you'll only need to fortify it a little more and you'll be able to use it."

"Your Lordship helped Cizhou out of a terrible predicament," Kong Ling said. "We would never try to fool you on this matter. We mentioned this place to the vice commander yesterday as well, and the vice commander said he would personally make a trip up to take a look when he next finds the time. He seemed to like the idea, too."

They had been rather occupied last night, and Shen Zechuan had had neither time nor opportunity to bring the matter up. Furthermore, Xiao Chiye had left in a hurry this morning, while Shen Zechuan was still groggy with sleep.

"The place is good," Xiao Chiye said with no change in expression. "It'll make a suitable camp for the Imperial Army. Lanzhou and I both like it. You needn't be so courteous, but thank you. We'll take it."

Shen Zechuan rose from the bed and pulled on a plain, white set of day robes. He had planned to go out, but the marks their lovemaking had left behind were too obvious. The bites on his chest, waist, thighs, and collarbones could be covered with clothes, but he was too sensitive to

pleasure; when they overindulged as they had last night, the redness at the corners of his eyes would often linger throughout the next day.

Ding Tao was standing on the veranda feeding the red carp in the basin. He was prattling on and on, telling Gu Jin a story. As he gestured, the fish bait in his hands slipped into the basin, where the two red carp gobbled it down. By the time Gu Jin realized what was happening, one of them had already become so bloated it had gone belly up.

Before Gu Jin could raise a hand to cuff the boy, Ding Tao sensed trouble. He hastily stuffed the remaining fish bait into his pocket and fled toward the main room, yelling, “Gongzi! Bad news! Jin-ge fed the fish to death!”

Shen Zechuan picked up the sweet soup from the tray a maidservant had brought in, handed a bowl to Ding Tao, and told him to sit under the eaves and drink it. He turned to Gu Jin. “How are your injuries today?”

When Gu Jin saw Shen Zechuan wearing wooden clogs, he knew he wouldn’t go out today. Bowing in greeting, he answered, “Much better. The physician came as scheduled to change my bandages. Since Gongzi is staying in, shall we ask the kitchen to prepare the meals now?”

Clusters of green foliage decorated the grounds in the courtyard, while the shadows of flowers adorned the wide panels of the two open doors. The weather was fine and clear today. Though it was not yet noon, it was already starting to get warm. Cupping his hands in the sunlight, Shen Zechuan’s slender fingers looked like they were cradling a handful of clear amber. He couldn’t stand the cold, but he was also averse to heat. He looked exhausted today, his body and mood both hopelessly languid.

“It’s hot out. Shifu disdains greasy food, and the heat makes Ce’an cranky. Tell the cook a few light dishes will do. You’re still healing, so do as the physician and Shifu have told you and get the kitchen to make you an individual portion.” Shen Zechuan retreated half a step and returned to the coolness of the shade under the eaves. “Ding Tao, go to the courtyard and call Shifu over.”

Ji Gang had chosen not to stay in the separate courtyard Shen Zechuan had offered him. Instead, he lived in the third courtyard together with Qiao Tianya and the rest of the guards. People tended to fear loneliness as they aged; it was inevitable that he would grow melancholy without Qi Huilian around to squabble with. Fortunately, the guards were a mix of those from Libei and those who had come with Shen Zechuan from the Embroidered Uniform Guard. All of them held Ji-Style Boxing in high esteem. They hoped to take a few pointers from Ji Gang, and liked to hang around him when they weren't on duty. All of them were young lads yet to be married. Ji Gang found them a boisterous and lively bunch, and it lifted his mood to be around them too.

He retired early and rose early these days. On this particular morning, he had woken at the crack of dawn and watched Qiao Tianya and the rest practice boxing in the courtyard. After taking his tea, he came out for a stroll, whereupon he found Shen Zechuan abed. Folding his hands behind his back, he took another stroll around the manor, returning to find that Shen Zechuan still had yet to rise. As he stepped into the courtyard a third time, he couldn't refrain from asking, "Why did you get up so late today? Are you ill?"

Taken aback, Shen Zechuan was tongue-tied for a moment. "I overslept."

Noting that he did seem a little tired today, Ji Gang said, "I understand there are many issues that want your attention right now, but you must still have a care for your health. I'll cook tonight—we'll have some fish."

As they chatted, Xiao Chiye returned. Spotting Ding Tao at the entrance of the courtyard, he knew Ji Gang had come. He took off his outer robe before entering and asked Chen Yang as he washed his hands, "Did Shifu come this morning too?"

Chen Yang answered truthfully. "Gongzi bought Shifu a skylark a few days ago, and Shifu has made it his habit to take a stroll with the bird every morning when he gets up. Gongzi was still sleeping when he came to our courtyard this morning, and he asked after him several times."

Xiao Chiye wiped his hands and walked along the veranda toward them. Before entering the courtyard, he made a disciple's bow to Ji Gang. He had been nothing but respectful to Ji Gang and Zuo Qianqiu back at Plum Blossom Manor, but Ji Gang could never forget the kick he had given Shen Zechuan six years ago. Now that Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye had thrown in their lot together and were working toward a common goal, Ji Gang thought they had merely buried the hatchet and were no more than good friends. For Shen Zechuan's sake, he wouldn't give Xiao Chiye a hard time.

Ji Gang and Zuo Qianqiu were martial brothers, so etiquette demanded Xiao Chiye bow to him. Ji Gang nodded and said simply, "No need for such formalities, Your Lordship."

Xiao Chiye took his seat. Ji Gang sat at the head of the table, and Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan sat across from each other. As they ate, Ji Gang asked Xiao Chiye about the suppression of the bandits and inquired after Zuo Qianqiu. Xiao Chiye answered every question in detail, striving not to give a perfect answer, but rather to be honest and sincere.

Ji Gang was a man who put great stock in sentiment. In his younger years, he had fumbled an assignment due to his drinking and caused his adoptive father, Ji Wufan, to lose the favor of the Guangcheng Emperor. The incident had weighed heavily on his heart. Later, after Duanzhou fell, he never touched another drop. He did not possess Qi Huilian's illustrious reputation, but he still retained great prestige among the Embroidered Uniform Guard. It was for his sake that Ge Qingqing, along with the men under him, had been willing to go so far to help Shen Zechuan when he was first flogged and thrown into the Imperial Prison, and continued to extend their loyalty to him after. In the years Ji Gang had served as vice commander in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he had rarely taken advantage of his authority against others, and he had abhorred Pan Rugui and his ilk. Again and again, he had helped innocent citizens redress the injustices they suffered at the cost of offending quite a number of powerful men.

Out of respect for an elder like this, Xiao Chiye did not rely on cleverness or flattery to win him over. On the contrary, he had to bare all his

sincerity. Only then would he stand a chance of getting Ji Gang to see him in a new, more favorable light.

Their meal lasted an hour. Assuming the pair of them had many more important matters to discuss, Ji Gang didn't stay for long before taking his leave.

Xiao Chiye changed out of his robes beside Shen Zechuan, who was calculating their recent expenses with brush and ink. Bare-chested, Xiao Chiye pulled over Shen Zechuan's free hand and placed it on his back. Shen Zechuan immediately felt the sweat on Xiao Chiye's skin and looked up. "That nervous, huh?"

"Terrified." Xiao Chiye swiftly dressed. "I was worried he wouldn't find me earnest enough, and I would alienate Shifu even more. I've been so busy recently. I'll have to have a good talk with Shifu one of these days."

"A father's love for his child seeks nothing in return." Shen Zechuan set the brush down. "There is no transactional exchange when it comes to Shifu, only heartfelt sincerity. Er-gongzi has a long road ahead of him. That kick of yours really set you back."

Xiao Chiye slumped into the rattan chair and thought for a moment. "If it had been my old man sitting there with us today, I might not have survived the meal."

Still trepidatious, Xiao Chiye put a hand to his own chest and studied Shen Zechuan, who was occupied with the accounts. As Xiao Chiye watched, he picked up the brush and set it down repeatedly; his sleeve slid back to reveal a sliver of fair skin. His profile was serene. There was no one else in the room, and his collar, slightly loosened as a concession to the heat, exposed a snow-white expanse dotted with love bites.

How delicate.

Xiao Chiye's mind drifted as he gazed blankly at Shen Zechuan. Thoughts swirled through, yet nothing concrete materialized.

"Lanzhou," Xiao Chiye called out to him.

Shen Zechuan's attention was elsewhere—he was thinking he should get Ge Qingqing to send him a few capable managers from Juexi who could keep the account books—when Xiao Chiye's voice broke through his thoughts. Though his eyes never left the page, he tilted his face slightly toward Xiao Chiye. "Yes?"

Jolting to his feet, Xiao Chiye paced a few tight circles before squatting behind Shen Zechuan and embracing him. Shen Zechuan's focus was extraordinary; his hand, still moving over the page, didn't so much as wobble in its strokes.

Xiao Chiye nuzzled against Shen Zechuan's cheek from behind until Shen Zechuan's cheeks grew warm. Shen Zechuan had no idea what was up with Xiao Chiye. The man never said a word as he felt Shen Zechuan up, holding him in his arms and clinging to him like glue. Just like that, Shen Zechuan sat in Xiao Chiye's embrace and continued to calculate his accounts. When he ran into difficulty, he got Xiao Chiye to stretch out his fingers for him to count on. Xiao Chiye refused and instead did the sums in his head without letting go of Shen Zechuan for an instant. Surprisingly, he was swift and accurate in his calculations.

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“Er-gongzi,” Shen Zechuan said eventually, pushing the abacus aside, “you have quite the knack for this. Calculate these for me, will you?”

Xiao Chiye dragged the abacus back. “Keep at it long enough and I’ll fumble. This is complicated stuff; better to hand it over to people who do this for a living. Do you know who in Qudu is best at arithmetic?”

“That, I don’t know,” Shen Zechuan admitted.

“Third Lady Hua, Hua Xiangyi.”

“Then do you know who in Zhongbo is most skilled at luring the target away with diversionary tactics?”

Xiao Chiye ventured a guess. “Tantai Long?”

“It’s Xiao Ce’an.” Shen Zechuan finally looked at him and said in all seriousness, “Nosing at me until my heart is pounding and I’m too preoccupied to work.”

“I’m unworthy of such praise.” Xiao Chiye pressed in closer. “It’s only because I saw the young gongzi sweating so delicately, with his robes in such disarray, that I’ve come over personally to warn him against prying eyes.”

“Then you are a true gentleman,” Shen Zechuan said, dipping his finger into his tea and tracing it along the back of Xiao Chiye’s hand, “unlike me and my wayward thoughts.”

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Chapter 119:
Old Acquaintance

"WHAT THOUGHTS? Let's hear them," Xiao Chiye said.

Their proximity was making Shen Zechuan too warm; he was sweating. He began to lift his hand away. "Some things are better left unsaid."

Xiao Chiye caught Shen Zechuan's finger and laughed. "Are they? Then you listen, and *I'll* say them."

Shen Zechuan dropped his eyes to the pages of his account books.

Xiao Chiye held Shen Zechuan's fingertip and followed his gaze. "I haven't even started and you're already feeling warm?"

Shen Zechuan looked askance at Xiao Chiye and mouthed, *Because of you*.

Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan for a moment, then ducked his head, burying his face in the crook of Shen Zechuan's neck. All his earlier feelings had dissolved with this one glance at Shen Zechuan, turning into a raging torrent that surged from his heart through his entire body. Yet no matter how these tempestuous waves battered him, he was hesitant to exert so much as the tiniest bit of force in this embrace.

Over the years he had spent in Qudu, that kick he had given Shen Zechuan the day they met had turned, silently and secretly, into jolts of pain that seized Xiao Chiye's heart whenever he thought of it. The heavy storm they had weathered together had scoured that turbulent sea of love and hate until only a crystal-clear lake remained. Xiao Chiye retracted his talons, bowing his head in submission before the word *love*.

Shen Zechuan tugged his hand gently free and laced his fingers with Xiao Chiye's, bumping his ear gently against Xiao Chiye's heavy head on his shoulder. "Have you fallen asleep?"

When Xiao Chiye looked up, his voice was hoarse. "Oh, how I love you."

Shen Zechuan was stunned.

Staring into his eyes, Xiao Chiye enunciated each word as he repeated, “I love you.”

Dumbstruck, Shen Zechuan took a moment to find his voice. “I—”

But Xiao Chiye couldn’t wait any longer. He kissed Shen Zechuan hard, as if with that kiss, he could convey all the love in his heart he could never express with words alone. The cool breeze in the courtyard stirred the bamboo blinds, and under the eaves, the shadows of the flowers shifted with the slanting light of the sun. That golden light, having slipped around the garden, now lay across the floor at their feet.

The Beiyuan Hunting Grounds were not far from Cizhou, accessible via a bridleway that connected the two. Snowcrest could reach it in half a day of riding.

The next morning, Xiao Chiye took Chen Yang and Ding Tao to survey the site, while Shen Zechuan spent the time finishing his accounting for their time in Cizhou and meeting with Zhou Gui and Kong Ling to make adjustments to their plan for the Cizhou garrison troops.

“I’ll admit I hoped quite a number of people might come forward to answer our recruitment call, but I never expected *this* many!” Zhou Gui was practically glowing. “With this kind of help, we can expand our fields again next year.”

Kong Ling, too, appeared delighted as he explained to Shen Zechuan, “There’s a shortage of grain outside our walls, which Cizhou can fill. To many of those in desperate situations, this will be timely help that not only meets their most urgent needs but also prevents them from turning to banditry. Vice Commander, we’ll have to trouble you for the military equipment for the garrison.”

“The way things are going, there won’t be a bandit left in Cizhou’s territory by spring next year.” Zhou Gui had been up the whole night making plans. “If we can also help Dunzhou and Duanzhou feed their people, the bandits from Mount Luo will fall apart on their own.”

“It’s true that the recruitment so far has been a success, but Your Excellency cannot rely on this alone,” Shen Zechuan cautioned. “Cizhou has been able to produce such a large volume of food because everyone, from top to bottom, has worked together toward one purpose for the past five years. But Duanzhou shares a border with Biansha; even if they have a mind to till their land and sow crops, they won’t be able to do it. And we mustn’t forget—the dragon throne sits empty, and troubled times breed ruthless men of great ambition. If there’s a Lei Jingzhe on Mount Luo, perhaps Chazhou has their own Lei Jingzhe as well. Cizhou has only begun to take its first steps; we needn’t rush.”

“That’s right.” Kong Ling nodded. “Our most pressing task now is the matter of household registration. Many of the people in Cizhou today fled here from other places; they have no identifying documents on them. If they wish to settle down in Cizhou, they will need an identity.”

Shen Zechuan paused in thought. “During the years of Yongyi, the Eastern Palace pushed for a Yellow Register system, to be checked and verified by layers of prefects, district magistrates, and townships of the various lands. Cizhou is not so densely populated yet. Since you are no longer under the empire’s rule, you can abolish the original registers and allow Cizhou to develop its own, making sure everyone is accounted for and no vagrants are wandering through. Once such a registry is finalized, Cizhou can collect taxes based on the register, and the prefecture’s accounts will be clearer too.”

“In that case, let’s get to work on it in the next few days.” Zhou Gui paused for a moment, then continued, “The only concern now is the Qidong Garrison Troops.”

“It’s been so long,” Kong Ling agreed. “Why is there no news from Qidong?”

Shen Zechuan had formed his own speculation about this delay.

If Qudu wished to stop Xiao Chiye from returning to Libei, they should have mobilized Qi Zhuyin at once. She could have stopped Xiao Chiye at the border of Zhongbo a month ago. But they hadn’t. Instead, they’d sent Han Jin, an armchair strategist who was all talk and no action.

The Imperial Army had taken this son of lawful birth from the Han Clan captive outside Dancheng, and he was still being held in Cizhou's prison even now. Qidong's troops were distributed between its five commanderies such that Qi Zhuyin could assemble a hundred thousand men within half a month. Yet there was still no sign of her.

It was late in the evening when Shen Zechuan emerged from the Zhou manor; he'd assumed Xiao Chiye would be still on his way back to the city, and so hadn't been in a hurry to return home. As he descended the stairs, the path ahead was bathed in light. Fei Sheng, carrying a lantern, lit the way for Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan had been so busy with other matters these last few days that he'd had no opportunity to speak with Fei Sheng. In the intervening time, Fei Sheng had tried his best to cozy up to Chen Yang and the others, and was the most diligent in serving tea and pouring water for Ji Gang. This man, a veteran who had tumbled his way out of Qudu, was presently playing attendant for Shen Zechuan, keeping silent as they walked so as to not interrupt Shen Zechuan's thoughts. From all appearances, he was content simply to hold the lantern.

The streets were still full of people at this hour. Fei Sheng was carefully guiding Shen Zechuan through the crowds when he heard Shen Zechuan speak up. "I heard you recommended yourself to His Lordship before he went out to the hunting grounds this morning."

"Gu Jin has yet to recover from his injuries, so I thought of going along with His Lordship on his behalf," Fei Sheng replied, his expression unchanging.

Shen Zechuan turned back to the road and said nothing more.

As they passed through the gate of the residence, Qiao Tianya took over the lantern. Gu Jin was still in the courtyard, so Fei Sheng wasn't needed for guard duty. He went back alone without being told.

"If Master keeps giving him the cold shoulder, he may come to bear you a grudge," Qiao Tianya remarked.

Shen Zechuan cast a glance over his shoulder as he stepped onto the long walkway. Fei Sheng had already turned through the arching moon gate

on the other side. “I have a mind to use him, but he may not think much of me. He held a higher rank in the Embroidered Uniform Guard than you did. He was one of Han Cheng’s right-hand men before the emperor’s untimely death, and relied on Han Cheng’s influence. There must be a good reason Han Cheng wants him dead. It’s been days since he arrived in Cizhou, yet he’s shown no intention of opening up to me.”

Pausing in his steps, Shen Zechuan smiled at Qiao Tianya. “It wasn’t me he was gunning for when he risked everything during our flight from Qudu, but Ce’an. Ce’an is the second lawful son of the Prince of Libei. The Heir of Libei was severely injured at the time, and everyone thought Ce’an was going back to take up Xiao Fangxu’s mantle. If there was already a rift forming between Fei Sheng and Han Cheng, rather than make endless concessions to achieve his aims in the capital, why not leave Qudu for Libei and carve out another path for himself? Becoming the hero who saved Xiao Chiye’s life is enough to secure him a place in Libei for life.”

By now, Qiao Tianya too had some understanding of Fei Sheng. “Gu Jin can’t travel easily now that he’s wounded. Fei Sheng recommended himself this morning because he’s hoping to take Gu Jin’s place. A pity His Lordship is a hard-hearted man who won’t give him a chance.”

But Fei Sheng was circumspect. He had been so attentive toward Ji Gang precisely so he would have something to fall back on in the event that he was rejected. He’d approached Xiao Chiye today partially in an attempt to sound him out. When he saw Xiao Chiye had no intention of using him, he had set his sights on Shen Zechuan instead.

“The man has real talent,” Shen Zechuan said. “No less than Gu Jin. It would be a pity to cast him aside.”

As they spoke, they arrived at the courtyard. Gu Jin got up to instruct the kitchen to serve dinner, but Shen Zechuan called for him to wait.

“He should be back soon.” Shen Zechuan turned toward the house. “Go wait for him at the gates.”

Yet several hours into the night, Xiao Chiye had still not returned. Half the candles had burned down before Shen Zechuan heard the rustle of movement outside.

Xiao Chiye strode into the courtyard but did not enter the room immediately. He was covered in dust, so he stripped off his outer robe before turning back, drawing Shen Zechuan's attention to the people behind him. "Lanzhou."

Shen Zechuan looked past Xiao Chiye and saw Chen Yang and Gu Jin walking in, supporting someone between them, their face concealed in the darkness of the courtyard. The person's outer robe was in shreds; even his trousers were torn. He was wearing a pair of straw shoes that had split at the soles, and his legs were caked to the knee in mud. He seemed to sway on his feet and had to rely on Chen Yang and Gu Jin to hold him up as he babbled. Disheveled and filthy, with his hair loose and face dirty, the man was a sorry sight.

As he came under the faint light of the lanterns, Shen Zechuan suddenly recognized him. "Lord Yu?"

The man shuddered violently, flailing against the hands that propped him up as he peered through the dimness in disbelief. A pair of eyes peeked out from behind his tangled hair. He froze for a moment when he saw Shen Zechuan. Then he gulped, his mouth opening and closing, and broke down bawling.

"Thank heaven I made it! I'm fixin' to keel over from exhaustion!" Yu Xiaozai cried hoarsely, wiping tears off his filthy face. "Vice Commander! The Grand Secretary's no more! I almost got done in too! I've been fleein' and hidin' the whole way here. What kinda life is this!"

Startled, Shen Zechuan strode forward and asked in a grim voice, "Secretariat Elder Hai? How did he die?"

Yu Xiaozai's words were choked with sobs. He wanted to answer, but all that came out were wails as he shook his head, beyond words. He cried so hard he was on the verge of sliding to the ground even with Gu Jin and Chen Yang's support. At last, overwhelmed with grief and hoarse from exhaustion, he said in the official dialect, "The Grand Secretary…the Grand Secretary risked his life to protest, in vain."

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“Take him to calm down and get him a change of clothes,” Xiao Chiye said. “Gu Jin, tell the kitchen to send over some soup.”

Those wretched sobs were still ringing in the air. Shen Zechuan had frozen where he stood. He had considered hundreds of possibilities, but he’d never expected Hai Liangyi would die. Hai Liangyi was the pillar holding up the nation, the stabilizing force in Qudu. He had remained steady in the Grand Secretariat through all the years when the Hua and Pan factions were at the height of their power. Even if Han Cheng wanted to install a descendant from his own clan on the throne after Li Jianheng’s death, anyone—both within and without the imperial court—could see that Hai Liangyi was still the best possible minister with whom to entrust the child.

Xiao Chiye took Shen Zechuan’s arm, bringing him gently out of his numb shock. “I found him held captive by a group of bandits a few miles west of the hunting grounds. He had a hard time getting out of Qudu, and he was robbed after leaving Dancheng, so he walked all the way here barefoot. He has a letter on him, from Cen Yu to you. And he has news about Qudu and Qidong.”

Yu Xiaozai still needed help walking when he entered the main room. Weak from hunger, he clutched his bowl and gulped down his food before they began their conversation. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he ate, and he choked and coughed through his mouthfuls, as though he couldn’t swallow fast enough. Only when his hunger abated somewhat did he cover his face with a fresh handkerchief and wipe it clean.

“It’s truly a stroke of luck I could live long enough to see you, Vice Commander. I’ve got Lord Cen’s letter with me. I kept it close to my chest this whole way for fear the bandits would search me and take it.” Yu Xiaozai sat back on his heels and struggled to find the words. “Before I begin, there is something I must tell you: The emperor about to ascend the throne is a woman.”

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Chapter 120:
Capital Affairs

THERE WAS NO PLACE for women in the imperial court. The rule of heaven drove them into the inner chambers, where they became delicate objects kept within the small courtyard of their living quarters, cared for in every way by their monarch and their servants, their fathers and sons. While they waited to be married off, these noble daughters were porcelain vases appraised for their value. Vases had no lofty aspirations or opinions on where they might be placed.

The empress dowager, Hua Hewei, came from illustrious origins. She was a daughter of direct descent born to the principal wife of the Hua Clan. As a child, she had seen nothing of the world beyond the walls of her quarters, and even after her coming-of-age ceremony at fifteen, she was still bound within the confines of her courtyard. As empress, she had wrested away the highest power in the world from her husband's hands, yet still she never stepped beyond that line into the public world of men; instead, she drew down the beaded curtain that kept women out of sight of the court and ruled cautiously from behind it.

Marshal Qi Zhuyin came from a similarly distinguished line. She was a daughter of direct descent born to the principal wife of the Qi Clan, a family of celebrated generals. Before she went to war, she had been betrothed, but after she came back a soldier, no man dared marry her. She had never received the public conferment of rank she deserved, only a concession before the Jade Dragon Terrace. The Ministry of Rites claimed that as a woman, she was unworthy of enjoying the posthumous privilege of being enshrined and worshiped within the Imperial Ancestral Temple after death, as other such distinguished individuals were. Even today, the great general Qi Zhuyin was spoken of in Qudu as the little girl from Qidong. If even one of Qi Shiyu's sons had lived up to expectations, the position of commander in chief of the Qidong garrisons would never have fallen upon her shoulders.

Xue Xiuzhuo hadn’t planned on helping a woman take the throne at the beginning. That acute disappointment of finding out the lost imperial heir was a girl had driven him to immediately change his strategy—but he changed his mind again when he met Ling Ting.

The girl resembled the Guangcheng Emperor far too much. Any minister old enough to have known the Guangcheng Emperor would be able to guess Ling Ting’s parentage at a glance—she was an aberration, the result of incest within the Li Clan.

After the Eastern Palace fell from power during the reign of Yongyi, the Guangcheng Emperor only ever left the palace to call upon the consumptive Prince Qin and his beautiful, defenseless wife. The emperor had no favored concubine in the latter years of his reign, and after he fell ill, his wife and empress, Hua Hewei, seized control of the imperial court and harem to prevent him from begetting another heir. Confined within the layers of walls around him, the Guangcheng Emperor set his sights on his daughter-in-law.

It was only a pity Princess Consort Qin gave birth to a girl.

Like an old lion who had run himself into the ground, the ailing Guangcheng Emperor had hardly cracked open his eyes when he learned the news; after this, he let go of all the lofty aspirations he had harbored for another son. No one knew when Prince Qin caught wind of the affair, but not long after, the prince passed away from his own illness. Before his death, he had cast Ling Ting out of Qudu—but as if guided by the hand of fate, Xiangyun had come across her and brought her back.

When Xue Xiuzhuo found Ling Ting, she was already in her teens and uncouth in her behavior. Preparing her to take up the role of imperial heir would have been an impossible task without the will to transform her from the inside out, a process as painful as shaving living bone. At first, it was difficult. She had wasted so much time in Xiangyun Villa. If the girl lacked the resolve to completely erase all those superfluous traces of her early life, then nothing could be done, even if Xue Xiuzhuo himself had the superhuman endurance to try.

But Ling Ting had corrected herself, one step at a time. Little by little, she carved away those vulgar and frivolous traits. When she began, there were many words she could not read, so she studied through the night, practicing the strokes she couldn't write properly all day and well into the darkness. She seemed to possess the last remnant of strength heaven had left for the Li dynasty. Watching her, Xue Xiuzhuo saw a faint glimmer of light in that dark and crumbling empire.

A few months ago, when the warm and misty rains of spring had enveloped the silk-tree blossoms—when Qi Huilian, held prisoner, had rejected Xue Xiuzhuo—Ling Ting had been sitting upright at a table, practicing calligraphy.

She put so much strength in her strokes she almost tore the paper.

When she was done, Ling Ting turned her head aside to look out at the drizzle. She watched the rain shimmer down for a long time, expressionless. Later, when Xue Xiuzhuo came to have his meal with her, she sat politely at her place at the table and ate with exacting table manners. Xue Xiuzhuo was particular about not speaking while eating, so they never talked during their meals. Afterward, it was his habit to quiz Ling Ting on her studies. This was the most important event of the girl's day. Ling Ting had to be precise and clear in her answers. Xue Xiuzhuo never scolded or hit her, but he was more stringent with her than anyone had ever been.

"Xiansheng." Ling Ting paused with her head lowered. "Am I going to have a new teacher?"

Gathering the books on the table, Xue Xiuzhuo said without inflection, "This isn't something you ought to concern yourself with."

Ling Ting was silent. She sat with her hands on her knees, listening as Xue Xiuzhuo rose and walked toward the door. At last she turned to look at him. "Is it because I'm a woman?"

Xue Xiuzhuo stopped and turned back to look at Ling Ting too. The girl never averted her eyes. Her steady composure resembled Xue Xiuzhuo's own.

"I'm a woman," Ling Ting repeated. "If this is the reason the new teacher isn't willing to teach me, then I'd like to ask to meet him."

Xue Xiuzhuo turned away and proceeded to change his shoes. The rain outside grew louder. “No. You two are simply not fated to be teacher and pupil. I will continue to teach you.”

“Fate will not give in to compromise. Wise instructors are hard to come by. I don’t wish to miss out on such a teacher.” Ling Ting had already risen to her feet. “Xiansheng.”

But Xue Xiuzhuo did not look back or answer her. He lifted the curtain, and a servant boy waiting outside rushed to hold an umbrella for him. Carrying the books himself, Xue Xiuzhuo descended the steps and left.

Ling Ting stood where she was and watched through the gap of the curtain as Xue Xiuzhuo disappeared into the downpour within a few strides. She knew this was an unvoiced rejection from Xue Xiuzhuo. Whatever other people thought of Xue Xiuzhuo, in Ling Ting’s eyes, beneath his pleasant and refined mask was a terrifyingly calm core, as well as a subtle arrogance: He would never let himself be manipulated by others, and could rarely be convinced to change his mind.

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She had no choice but to let the matter drop. She sat back down, flipped open the essay on contemporary politics Xue Xiuzhuo had left behind, and began to copy Xue Xiuzhuo's handwriting. For all her practice, she could never write like him—she didn't know how to rein herself in or sand down her edges. Her strokes were like steel blades: They could cut, but not bend. Every word she wrote took the most direct path.

Several months later, the sun blazed down upon the heads of a dense mass of court officials kneeling on the Jade Dragon Terrace. These were officials from common households, led by Hai Liangyi.

At the end of the sixth month, Han Cheng had brought back a boy from his own clan, claiming the child was a lost descendant of the Li Clan. Under Yao Wenyu's meticulous care, Hai Liangyi's health had improved enough for him to attend court. The first thing he did when he returned was reject Han Cheng's memorial regarding the child in his capacity as Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat and demand an official verification of the child's identity. But the emperors of the Li Clan were all dead. The empress dowager alone couldn't determine if this child was a legitimate descendant either. The two parties sank into a stalemate, neither willing to make any concession.

Han Cheng, head swollen with his new power, had dared to publicly refute Hai Liangyi: "I was the vice commissioner of the Eight Great Battalions during the reign of Yongyi, and the top military officer under the Guangcheng Emperor's command. I have in my possession a private letter from the Guangcheng Emperor entrusting me with the care of this child. Grand Secretary, does this not satisfy you?"

All the vigor Hai Liangyi had possessed before his illness had faded. If he stood a few moments too long, his heart would palpitate and his hands would tremor. He stepped out of the ranks of officials and said, "These are mere words, with no basis in evidence. If the commander is willing to make the private letter public and turn it over to the Grand Secretariat for examination, then you and I will have no further need to wage this war of words in the imperial court."

Inwardly Han Cheng sneered. The vacant throne and lack of an imperial heir should have been Hai Liangyi's greatest sources of anxiety. If he was unwilling to make a concession here, the secretariat elder must have already found his own candidate. "The throne of the emperor has sat empty for more than a month. What is Your Excellency waiting for? The Grand Secretariat has deliberated again and again. Have you still not come up with a solution?"

Sweating profusely and feeling a tightness in his chest, Hai Liangyi took several shallow breaths before replying. "We examined the imperial clan register and learned that the second son of the former Prince Yan's common-born grandson still resides in Huaizhou. He is a descendant of the Li Clan with a traceable lineage. According to our laws, no one but him is a fit candidate for the throne."

"Prince Yan was the Prince of Huaizhou during the reign of Wanxuan. His direct descendants died in battle at Luoxia Pass, and those born to concubines are all collateral branches of the clan. How can they be considered to possess the blood of the Li Clan? Not to mention, the second son of Prince Yan's common grandson is approaching seventy—do you imagine he can manage state affairs at his age?" Han Cheng smiled without humor. "It's a long and bumpy journey to Qudu. Can he weather this kind of physical and mental torment? Grand Secretary, the very idea is absurd!"

Both parties stood their ground. The students from the Imperial College were also kneeling outside. From behind the beaded curtain, the empress dowager, who had been listening in silence, spoke up. "Although this matter is urgent, we must take time to discuss it fully. Secretariat Elder, I appreciate the Grand Secretariat's assistance in governmental affairs. There has never been a time when I've handled such important matters with anything less than the care they require. If you have objections, come to Mingli Hall to discuss them with me in person. Please ask the students to disperse."

She spoke gently, but Hai Liangyi could hear her displeasure.

Although Han Cheng was forceful in his advocacy for this child, he had always submitted his memorials in his capacity as the former vice commissioner of the Eight Great Battalions, without asking other officials

from the noble clans to support his proposal. This was deliberate. Firstly, it would allow the Han Clan to become the sole support the new emperor relied upon; and secondly, it would allow him to distance himself from the other noble clans.

This distance was exceptionally important.

Both Hua Siqian and Pan Rugui had lost their lives because they failed to put on a proper show of distance. Forming cliques to further one's own ends was a major taboo in the imperial court. The empress dowager had been managing state affairs again for two months. At present, she was as good as the emperor—and one thing she couldn't abide was her ministers flocking together to coerce her into making policy decisions. She neither promoted officials from common households as a gesture of goodwill, nor promoted officials from the noble clans in order to consolidate her power. She seemed to understand that Great Zhou had reached a tipping point. Instead of pinning her hopes on a puppet emperor, as she had done a few years ago, she might as well count on herself.

Hai Liangyi had been sick for weeks, during which time the officials from common households had been constantly on edge. In the absence of an emperor, Kong Qiu and Cen Yu had taken the lead, holding private discussions and repeatedly submitting memorials requesting that the empress dowager allow Hai Liangyi to return to the imperial court to administer state affairs. Now even the students from the Imperial College had the guts to engage in open discourse regarding state affairs. It was only the sixth month, yet already there were rumors that the empress dowager had seized power and planned to establish herself as the ruler of the realm.

The empress dowager had no overt discussions with Hai Liangyi while he was convalescing, but she sent the court eunuchs to his manor with increasing frequency, which was a kind of subtle pressure in itself.

Hai Liangyi thus returned to court partway through the sixth month, just as his illness began to take a turn for the better. Although he had for decades asserted that he was beholden to no faction or clique, he had long become the beacon to which all the scholars of common households in the land looked for guidance. This was a fact he couldn't deny even if he

wished to. He had, without meaning to, become a powerful force all his own.

When Hai Liangyi had fallen ill, everyone across the land had panicked. When Hai Liangyi rejected Han Cheng's memorial, the officials and students spent a day kneeling before the empress dowager even gave her reply. Without realizing it, he had become a thorn in the empress dowager's side, one far more dangerous than the pompous and overbearing Han Cheng.

Hai Liangyi remained standing with great effort. "The students of the Imperial College have always had a duty to discuss state affairs. The eyes of the empire are fixed on the imperial court; only when there is open dialogue can there be good policies. Your Majesty heads the administration and attends to every matter with diligence, but officials are appointed to share the burdens of their superiors above and to oversee the work of their subordinates below. It's Great Zhou's blessing that these students are so concerned over state affairs. Moreover, the matter of the prospective monarch is not a private, family affair. It is this subject's opinion that only by allowing them to remain can we have a frank discussion concerning the new emperor."

Though it was warm outside, it wasn't stuffy in the hall, and there were bamboo blinds and crushed ice everywhere. To Hai Liangyi, it even felt a little cool. He stood with his head bowed after saying his piece. Behind the beaded curtain, the empress dowager was silent for a long time. Just as Hai Liangyi's legs were starting to ache, she finally answered in an unhurried tone.

"What the secretariat elder says makes sense. In that case, I shall listen to you. As for the matter of the second son of Prince Yan's common grandson, I have yet to see the clan registry, so it would be inappropriate for me to come to any conclusion. Regardless, Han Cheng's candidate is already here. Shall we let the Court of Judicial Review assist in the investigation, or would you prefer the Ministry of Justice do it? I shall do as you say."

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Chapter 121:
Liangyi

WHEN COURT was dismissed, Hai Liangyi refused the support of anyone as he walked out. Kong Qiu and the rest knew the secretariat elder was strong-willed and hated to appear weak; they only dared trail behind him and watch as he hobbled along alone, slowly making his way down the steps.

Bathed in the last rays of the setting sun, his official robe was like a thin, dark scar melting into the evening splendor. This time last year, he had led hundreds of officials into court. He had been an imposing, spirited sight. Now, there was no trace of that will and spirit left in him.

Hai Liangyi reached the bottom of the steps and stopped. He slowly turned back to look at the officials on the stairs behind him, then at the last remaining glimmer of daylight above the upturned eaves of Mingli Hall.

“It’s getting dark,” Hai Liangyi said gently. “Be careful on your way back.”

For some reason, Kong Qiu was gripped by a sudden dread. He took a step forward and grasped Hai Liangyi’s arm to support him, his voice catching as he called out, “Teacher!”

Hai Liangyi waved a hand and turned back, walking toward the palace gates.

That descendant of Prince Yan’s grandson was Hai Liangyi’s last line of defense. As he watched the setting sun swallowed up by the shadows of the buildings, a sense of powerlessness washed over him. He knew what it signified for a child of the Han Clan to ascend the throne. He had fought this battle for thirty years, yet his slow and steady pursuit of peace had never scored him the victories he sought.

What could he do but use himself as tinder, throwing his old bones into the flames to feed the blazing fire, hoping to make enough sparks to ignite the long-dormant night sky. An endless night had descended upon the

Zhou empire, and Hai Liangyi seemed to be the only remaining torch. Yet even now, he couldn't quite bring himself to admit that Qi Huilian and the rest—all those who once shared the same goal as him despite their differing paths—had failed.

He had watched those great minds fall like shooting stars, one after another. In the end, he, once so insignificant, was the last man standing.

Thirty years ago, Hai Liangyi had not been concerned with either success or failure. And now, after thirty years, Hai Liangyi was entirely burned out and spent. Slowly but surely, he had walked his own path; he had attempted to grab hold of the radical Qi Huilian, who had charged recklessly ahead. But he'd failed. No one knew that the night the Eastern Palace had perished was the most devastating in Hai Liangyi's life.

By the time Hai Liangyi made his way to the palace gates, it was full dark, and he was out of breath. He lifted his sleeves to wipe sweat from his brow and saw Yao Wenyu waiting for him beside the sedan. Hai Liangyi let Yao Wenyu help him get settled inside. Just as his student was about to lower the curtain, Hai Liangyi spoke. "Yuanzhuo, there is a weight on my mind that has yet to be lifted. Why don't you make a trip to Jincheng tomorrow on my behalf. Pack your bags tonight."

During the court session a few days later, the empress dowager exempted Hai Liangyi from standing. But the more she treated him with courtesy and respect, the more clearly it signaled her increasing dissatisfaction with him. The grandmasters of remonstrance from the Chief Surveillance Bureau had come together over the past few days to launch a series of scathing rebukes of Han Cheng. Demands for official verification of the lineage of the child from the Han Clan were at an unprecedented high, and the tidal wave of support surging around Hai Liangyi forced the empress dowager to consider a concession.

The empress dowager had stayed awake all night deliberating, and her hesitation put Han Cheng in a desperate situation. Gradually, it dawned on him that the empress dowager was trying to rid herself of him by someone else's hand. As soon as he collapsed under the weight of his

gambit and perished beneath the chorus of castigation, the empress dowager could put the Han Clan's son on the throne at once without the inconvenient possibility of Han Cheng making his own grab for power. With him out of the way, she could turn her focus to confronting the officials of common backgrounds. Whether she wished to push Hai Liangyi aside indefinitely or simply replace the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat, she could do it with significantly more ease than she could at present.

Han Cheng was unwilling to give up—how could he surrender the power that was at his fingertips? If he had to put up with the censors' abuse, he would endure it until Hai Liangyi was dead!

"These are turbulent times," Han Cheng said. "Libei in the north is eyeing us like a tiger watches prey, while in the east, Zhongbo is beginning to stir as well. Will the people still follow the lead of the Grand Secretary if the throne sits empty because the Grand Secretariat keeps delaying the question of the imperial heir?" His mouth was blistered from the verbal battle that had gone on for days. He flung his sleeves and snapped, "If you ask me, the Grand Secretary is inciting his own clique to obstruct the imperial court from designating a new crown prince. His actions ought to be condemned!"

"That's a slanderous accusation!" Cen Yu rebuked him in his capacity as the head of the imperial censors. "We've been discussing the appointment of the imperial heir for days on end, yet the commander remains unwilling to verify the identity of the imperial heir. Who is the one trying to obstruct our efforts? The imperial court previously enjoyed the support of the whole realm. If not for the commander's insistence on arresting the Marquis of Dingdu, Xiao Chiye, would Qudu be caught in such a predicament?! If we are to hold someone accountable, you'd be the first to bear the blame!"

"I see how it is!" Han Cheng sneered and pointed at Cen Yu. "Xiao Chiye assassinated the late emperor. As chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard and Military Commissioner of the Eight Great Battalions, it was my duty to apprehend him! If what I did was wrong, perhaps you think he was right to assassinate the late emperor. Everyone knows you're on good terms with Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan. Yet Cen

Xunyi, the Ministry of Justice hasn't implicated you in their investigation, have they? What a good friend you have in Kong Boran. I'm truly envious!"

Fury colored Kong Qiu's face. "What nonsense is this? We're still investigating whether Xiao Chiye was involved in the late emperor's death. If we merely take your word for it without any witnesses, we might as well do away with the Ministry of Justice! Besides, were you not also present during our private feast? You had plenty to drink!"

"I'm a member of the Embroidered Uniform Guard," Han Cheng said. "It is my duty to keep my ear to the ground at all times, making note of what I see and hear. If I don't show up when you senior officials have your private gatherings, how can I know what has been said? I already had someone transcribe everything that was discussed that night in detail for Her Majesty. I'm innocent! Do you dare say the same?"

Having received a helping hand from Xiao Chiye in the past, the Minister of Works, Pan Xiangjie, was also fearful of being implicated and had been keeping a low profile in court. Han Cheng was at the height of his power, and Pan Xiangjie went along with whatever he said. Seeing them argue like this, his lips opened and closed, and he shuffled several steps back like a turtle retreating into its shell, too cowardly to cut in.

Gradually, their verbal assaults became more and more outrageous. Cen Yu was the most eloquent of them all, berating Han Cheng with such scathing force that Han Cheng could endure it no longer. He pointed at Cen Yu, his hand trembling with a rage that threatened to burst out of him. Still, he kept his wits. Closing his eyes, he slid to his knees and, surrendering his dignity, burst out into wailing.

"Your Majesty!" Han Cheng prostrated himself before the empress dowager and wept bitterly. "Your Majesty! This subject's heart is no less pure and bright than the moon overhead! It's my fault for trying to arrest Xiao Chiye. It was also my fault that the late emperor was assassinated. And now, somehow, it's my fault that we have no candidate for the throne! As a subject, I'm willing to be punished by my sovereign, and I'm willing to die for my sovereign! If I've erred, let the blame fall upon me! Kill me

alone or execute my family along with me—I will accept any sentence my master metes out!”

Kong Qiu found this man truly shameless. He promptly removed his official’s hat. “I am ashamed to stand beside such a vile character as the chief commander! If we cannot verify the legitimacy of the imperial heir, then I, Kong Boran, may as well forfeit my official post!”

The empress dowager shot to her feet. She lifted the beaded curtain, sweeping a cold glance over each of them in turn before stopping at Han Cheng. “We’re discussing matters of state in the imperial court; what are you crying for? Get up!”

She next turned to Kong Qiu. “You are a member of the Grand Secretariat, effectively second to the Grand Secretary. You preside over affairs of state, yet you constantly use your resignation as a threat. Are you trying to force my hand, or are you thinking only of your own reputation—only you would know! Since the first moment I stepped in on behalf of the throne, I have consulted with the Grand Secretariat in all matters great and small. What is there that can’t be worked out through civil discourse? Must you push every step of the way?!”

All the ministers fell to their knees.

“Our forefathers laid down the rule that the harem is not to interfere in politics. I have overstepped my station so many times it shames me to face my ancestors. Jianheng passed away so suddenly from illness. Had it not been for your repeated pleas, would I have dared to appear before this court once again to oversee state affairs? We are in need of an emperor, and I’m merely a widow without a child.” Hot tears brimmed in her eyes as she spoke. “When did I ever suffer such treatment while the Guangcheng Emperor lived?!”

Han Cheng appeared so moved by the empress’s abiding love for her husband that he covered his face as he lay face-down on the ground, wailing, “This subject never encountered such disrespect when the Guangcheng Emperor was around either. I know well that I’m an ignorant and shallow person. I’m merely an oaf. Of course I’m not so bold as to compare myself to any of the officials from the Grand Secretariat, much

less vie with the Grand Secretary himself for prestige. It's only because of my staunch loyalty and love for the Li dynasty that I returned the imperial heir to the court. Grand Secretary, why go so far to defame me?!"

Han Cheng had been fanning the flames toward Hai Liangyi all this time. Deep down, Kong Qiu was smoldering with anger. "Your Majesty… heaven can attest to the purity of the Grand Secretary's intentions. Designating an heir is no small thing. We are beset with difficulties on all sides. The survival of Great Zhou is at stake. If we do not proceed with prudence and caution now, I fear we will face disaster in the future."

"I understand that as well," the empress dowager replied. "And that is why I have called everyone here for days on end to discuss it." At last, she seemed to regain a little of her composure. "The imperial heirs dwindled after the Guangcheng Emperor's time, and now, we can't even find ourselves a prospective emperor. The tougher the crisis, the more important it is for us to work together as one. Han Cheng, why not hand over the Guangcheng Emperor's private letter so all the officials present can verify its authenticity?"

Obviously, Han Cheng had no such letter. He had merely been trying to wait out Hai Liangyi and the empress dowager. As soon as Hai Liangyi yielded, the wall of officials from common households would collapse with him. Any further protestations from the empress dowager would merely reveal her own ambitions to lead. At that point, she would have no choice but to let the Han Clan child ascend the throne, and Han Cheng would truly become the minister-guardian of the young emperor. The golden age of the Han Clan was right before his eyes.

Realizing that the empress dowager wanted to take him off the board before that could happen, he beat his chest and wailed louder. "Those of you who doubt my loyalty, you may as well kill me! My younger brother—my dear younger brother! After his hunt for Xiao Chiye, he remains hostage in Cizhou even now. For the Guangcheng Emperor, I took three slashes of a blade, and for the late emperor, I suffered injury to one eye. Tell me, am I a shallow, short-sighted person who deceives the world for my own selfish desire?!"

Selfish desire was all that fueled the passionate discourse at court. Cries and curses flooded the hall, but no one mentioned Prince Yan's descendant again. Kong Qiu remained kneeling, resigned, but his heart had already gone cold.

Hai Liangyi, who had not spoken a word that day, suddenly braced himself against the armrests of his chair and stood. Countless eyes converged on him. Officials from common backgrounds looked on expectantly, waiting for the Grand Secretary to turn the tide and regain control of the situation, while officials from the noble clans kept their silence as they watched for their next opportunity. All focused their attention on Hai Liangyi, just as they had in the past.

He coughed, his wizened hand trembling as he spat bloody spittle into a handkerchief. He swallowed to moisten his throat before slowly looking around the great hall at all those faces watching, and finally, at the empress dowager.

"Back when the Li Clan were merely feudal lords," he said, "it took years upon years of war before the empire was united. Over the past hundred years, generation upon generation of our Great Zhou's officials have, without exception, devoted themselves to the land and spared no effort in performing their duties. During the years of Yongyi, although the city walls of Qudu were old, the empire's integrity remained, and its spirit persevered. At the beginning of the reign of Yongyi, Qi Huilian of Yuzhou came in first in all three levels of the imperial examinations; from then on, the Imperial College flourished. Although the three imperial preceptors from the Yao Clan were noble in birth, they had welcomed ideas and opinions from all sides and recruited outstanding men of talent without prejudice. Most of the scholars of humble origins still serving in this imperial court today joined the court during that period."

Kong Qiu lowered his head. As he recalled the past, he couldn't help but tremble with quiet sobs.

"However, this period of brilliance during the reign of Yongyi was but a flash in the pan. The Guangcheng Emperor fell ill after a scant ten years on the throne. The noble clans thrived once again, and class prejudices divided the Imperial College. For the remainder of Yongyi and

the whole of Xiande, no scholars of common backgrounds entered the imperial court. Today, this is the imperial court of the noble clans."

Pan Xiangjie looked embarrassed and kept his head low in a kowtow without saying a word.

Han Cheng drew breath to speak, but Hai Liangyi raised his voice over him. "During the reign of Xiande, when the state treasury was empty, this subject asked Hua Siqian to hand over the account books. He colluded with others from the noble clans who served in the various ministries to dodge the issue, and dismissed me time and time again! That same year, Juexi was hit by a plague of locusts that ruined their crops, and the land was gripped by desolation and despair. Once again, this subject demanded that Hua Siqian hand over the accounts, only to have him brush me off. Not long after, Zhongbo's troops were defeated and its people massacred. Yet following this battle, the granaries of the six prefectures were emptied overnight! All the way until his death, Hua Siqian never gave a clear explanation for this! Was this his fault, or was it the fault of everyone here for enabling him?!"

Alarmed, Pan Xiangjie rushed to say, "About this, the Court of Judicial Review has already—"

"Since returning to court, this subject, Hai Renshi, has repeatedly remonstrated and requested to officially verify the lineage of the imperial heir from the Han Clan. Han Cheng has made excuse after excuse—as of this moment, he is still unwilling to hand over the letter supposedly entrusting the child to him. We have reached a dead end. I therefore took charge and directed the Grand Secretariat to conduct a search through the imperial registry before moving forward with a memorial asking Her Majesty to designate the descendant of Prince Yan of Huaizhou as the heir apparent. Here, we have reached another dead end."

Stunned by his impassioned tone, the empress dowager took half a step back. The beaded curtain clattered behind her as she regarded Hai Liangyi with shock and uncertainty.

Hai Liangyi was aflame. The fury in his heart had been suppressed for thirty years, and it burned so intensely his youthful spirit seemed to

blaze up once more, leaving the entire hall in shock. “As the Grand Secretary, I am to blame for the decline of the state! I have been remonstrating with the ruler all my life; whether I am successful or not, I have no more to fear! Since my protests are futile while alive, then I shall remonstrate with our Great Zhou today with my death! A prospective sovereign may be appointed, but it must not be the child from the Han Clan! A prospective sovereign may be appointed—”

Before anyone from the assembly could blink, Hai Liangyi’s sleeves rose with the wind, billowing like falling leaves set alight before their eyes. He charged headfirst at one of the great hall’s columns, and an earthshaking thud followed, along with the splatter of blood.

A deathly stillness descended over the hall. The empress dowager’s limbs went cold, and she nearly slid to the ground. She followed the trail of that splattered blood with dread until her eyes landed upon the crumpled form of Hai Liangyi. In a belated moment of realization, the entire court of officials rose to their feet with exclamations of shock. Kong Qiu scrambled over on his knees and propped Hai Liangyi up.

“Renshi…” The empress dowager’s voice trembled. “Why…why do this…?”

This one collision permanently severed Han Cheng’s route of retreat. With his death, Hai Liangyi would feed the flames of wrath of all the scholars in the land—that child of the Han Clan would never become emperor. Whoever dared risk universal condemnation to push him onto the throne would be reviled by every scholar across the empire.

Even Han Cheng was stunned. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined Hai Liangyi would go so far.

Face a wash of blood, Hai Liangyi looked up at the high, unreachable ceiling of the great hall. He had been chasing stability all his life—the first-rank crane on the mandarin square of his robe was a testament to his cautious, steady leadership. Yet, in his final moments, he for once did something extreme—he became the blazing sun that exploded, sending countless rays of light shooting through that pitch-black night of Great

Zhou. The crane on his chest, now stained bloodred, rose and fell with his last feeble breaths.

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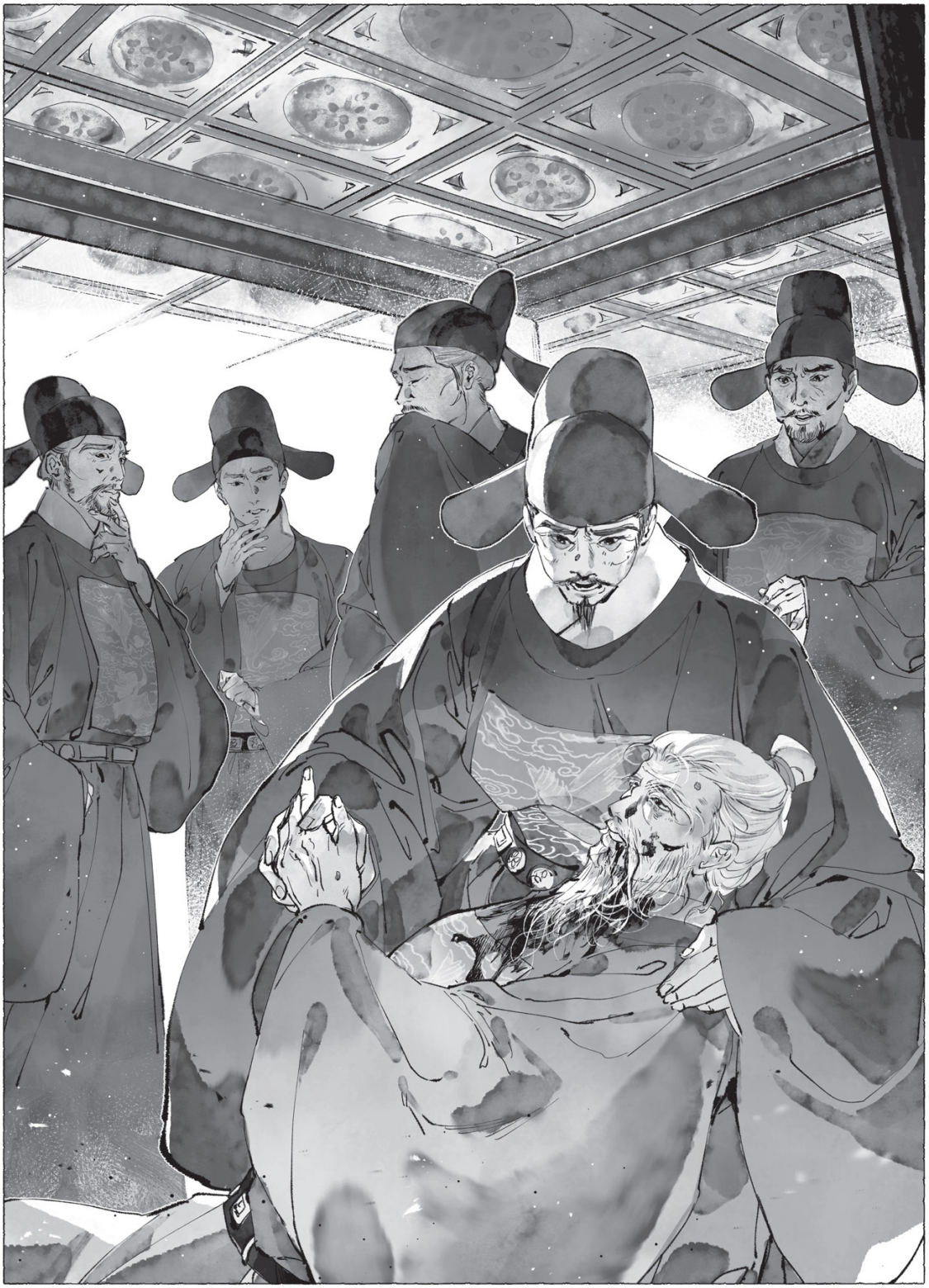

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“Boran,” Hai Liangyi whispered, gripping Kong Qiu’s hand. “I… have done all I can.”

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Chapter 122:
The Emperor’s Daughter

YU XIAOZAI BENT over and sobbed, unable to continue. All the common-born scholars of their generation who went on to take up official posts yearned to be either the patriotic and loyal Qi Huilian, who would lay down his life for his cause, or the wise and dedicated Hai Liangyi, the stabilizing force that could hold the country together in times of crisis. But this empire teetering in a tempest now echoed with the thunderous sound of collapse. In one night, the lofty aspirations of several tens of thousands of people shattered, turning Great Zhou into a shaken nation that echoed with the wails of the desperate.

Shen Zechuan turned his head aside in silence and listened to the sound of the night watchman making his rounds beyond the courtyard wall.

Yu Xiaozai finally ceased his sobbing and covered his face with a warm handkerchief. When he had composed himself, he continued. “The Grand Secretary’s final remonstration ended Han Cheng’s ambitions, but he refused to concede defeat. The students from the Imperial College were so agitated they blocked Han Cheng’s sedan on Shenwu Street as he returned from court and smashed it to pieces. The Eight Great Battalions locked down the Imperial College, arrested a few of the student agitators, and hauled them to the Imperial Prison. They even cut off food supplies to the college, so the students went on a hunger strike.”

Tears again rolled down Yu Xiaozai’s face. “I thought it would be the end of all the scholars in Qudu. But that night, as I looked at the Imperial College on top of Mount Jingyi, I saw the flickers of revolution and realized the profound foresight of the Grand Secretary. The blaze that would spread across the plains, from the single spark of his death, had already become a force to be reckoned with. To quell the fury of the students, the empress dowager once again demanded Han Cheng hand over the private letter entrusting the child to his care. In the meantime, she drove that false heir from the Han Clan out of the palace. Han Cheng had no choice but to agree. He promised to produce the letter for official verification within three days.

“The letter was forged, of course, and did not bear the Guangcheng Emperor’s personal seal. The Grand Secretariat immediately rejected Han Cheng’s candidate. After that, the empress dowager promised to meet with Prince Yan of Huaizhou’s descendant to establish a true candidate for imperial heir. But Huaizhou is far from Qudu. Just as Han Cheng had said, this descendant from Prince Yan’s branch was advanced in age. Between the long and tedious journey and the shock of being called to Qudu for such a purpose, he gave up the ghost before even arriving in the capital.

“The task of designating a prospective sovereign came to a complete impasse. Han Cheng, conniving as he was, leveraged the Eight Great Battalions’ power against the Grand Secretariat. He submitted a memorial requesting the eight cities step in to assist with governmental affairs. He urged the empress dowager to establish a Chamber for the Deliberation of State Affairs, populated entirely by officials from the noble clans. The empress dowager shelved the memorial without giving him an answer. Following in the footsteps of the Grand Secretary, Lord Boran submitted a memorial expressing conditional agreement with this plan, but requested that before Han Cheng could lead such a chamber, his military power must be revoked, as civil officials must not involve themselves with military affairs. Minster Kong hoped to use the opportunity to pry the Eight Great Battalions out of Han Cheng’s hands. Han Cheng flatly refused, and thus the Grand Secretariat didn’t give their approval for the chamber. Negotiations fell through once again.”

The lack of an imperial heir was the crux of this stalemate. With Kong Qiu at the helm, and in the face of the proposal for the eight cities to take up the reins of government, the officials of the Grand Secretariat had suggested a compromise—this, too, was in line with Hai Liangyi’s policy of keeping the peace. After all, the Grand Secretariat had no troops. Qidong was under control of the empress dowager, and Libei no longer obeyed Qudu’s deployment orders after Han Cheng’s attempt to arrest Xiao Chiye. Kong Qiu could only choose the lesser of two evils. Their most pressing goal was stripping Han Cheng of his military power. Whether or not they had control of the military themselves, they could not afford to hand over all the patrols in Qudu to the noble clans as they had before.

“It was at precisely this moment that Xue Xiuzhuo spoke up.” Yu Xiaozai’s lips quirked in a vague, bitter smile in the dimness. “With one stone, he stirred up a thousand waves. The move he made was ingenious.”

At the mention of Xue Xiuzhuo’s name, Xiao Chiye looked pointedly at Shen Zechuan.

After a moment of silence, Shen Zechuan turned to gaze out the window, his brow tightly furrowed. “Yes. You were right. This man is really something else. Rumors of an imperial heir made their way to us too easily, stirring us to action. When we arrived in Zhongbo, I suspected Han Cheng was the one who killed those boys. But it seems that Han Cheng is no different from Xi Hongxuan—another disposable pawn manipulated by Xue Xiuzhuo. It was careless of me to underestimate our enemy. One wrong move and the whole game is lost.”

The impasse in the imperial court had gone on less than half a month when the Imperial College shifted the target of their verbal attacks from Han Cheng to the prospect of the eight cities’ oversight of governmental affairs. The passionate students grew increasingly dissatisfied with Kong Qiu’s moderate strategy. Even as they penned articles and elegies mourning Hai Liangyi, they mourned the more radical Qi Huilian as well. Kong Qiu, at present, was not the Grand Secretary they wished for.

The empress dowager’s concession on verifying the Han Clan’s candidate had shown these students the power of collective action. They were like water droplets converging from all corners of the realm to form the boundless sea, believing their combined force could crash through the high wall before them. They saw a chance to rid the nation of the malady that was the noble clans right before their eyes.

After Kong Qiu conditionally agreed to Han Cheng’s proposal for the new governmental chamber, the rhetoric coming out of the Imperial College abruptly changed in focus. First, a strongly worded article was nailed to the door of the Kong residence; following that, all the criticisms formerly leveled at Han Cheng were redirected toward Kong Qiu. The students became increasingly convinced that the scholar-officials of common backgrounds led by Kong Qiu were too weak. This, they thought, was why Hai Liangyi had been left high and dry in the Grand Secretariat, leading to

his desperate action in his final remonstration. They made a list of all the court officials from the reign of Yongyi and checked, one by one, any connections those officials might have with officials from the noble clans. News that Cen Yu had invited Han Cheng to a private feast earlier in the year spread like wildfire, sending the students into a frenzy. They labeled Cen Yu, Kong Qiu, and even the Minister of War, Chen Zhen, as rank hypocrites.

A short time later, a group smashed Cen Yu's sedan on his way to morning court. He stood before the palace gates with his face covered in blood and raised a hand to heaven, swearing he had never had any inappropriate friendships with the noble clans. A bucket of shit was poured on him for his trouble.

Cen Yu couldn't believe these were the same students as before. He had served in the Chief Surveillance Bureau for twenty years and indicted countless major and minor officials of the court. He hadn't shied away from challenging even the Guangcheng Emperor. He'd never expected his name would one day be dragged through the mud as a villain who shamelessly sought personal gain at the expense of the nation.

Even the Yao Clan—held up as the exemplar of scholars who were concerned with politics yet kept their distance from power—was not spared. This clan that produced three imperial preceptors had enjoyed exceptional honor over the years. Though they had no representative in the imperial court after the reign of Xiande, their influence far surpassed that of the other clans—they were widely respected among both the noble clans and those of common backgrounds. Hai Liangyi, Qi Huilian, Kong Qiu, and many other old and new officials of the imperial court had all received the Yao Clan's advice and guidance at one time or another. The thriving heyday the Imperial College had enjoyed during the reign of Yongyi had been owed entirely to Old Master Yao's extensive recruitment of talented men. Yet now, the doors and windows of the clan's ancestral hall on the east side of the capital had been smashed. Had Kong Qiu not sent guards as soon as he heard, the hall would have burned down that night.

Yao Wenyu himself did not escape the fury. He was Hai Liangyi's only student, yet he refused to take up an official position in the imperial

court. His absence last time the Imperial College knelt in protest and clashed with Pan Rugui had not been forgotten. Now, with new grievances piling up on top of old scores, they tore up the essays they had once praised and likened Yao Wenyu to a thief—a swindler from the noble clans who had stolen Hai Liangyi's rare wealth of knowledge on the administration of the nation, yet refused to put it to use.

Qudu was plunged into chaos. The moment the Eight Great Battalions tried to suppress the students with force, the students would go on a hunger strike in protest. After a handful of students starved themselves to death, Han Cheng no longer dared act rashly.

Not even Qi Zhuyin, all the way in the Bianjun Commandery, managed to make it out unscathed. The marriage between Hua and Qi was due to take place the next month, and those impassioned student diatribes spread like a brushfire all the way to Qidong. The grand marshal had always been plagued by insomnia; now, whenever she wished to rest her eyes at her desk, she asked Qi Wei to read those essays aloud to her. The harsher the scoldings, the more soundly she slept.

A fire had indeed begun to rage across the Zhou empire, but not in the way Hai Liangyi had anticipated. Words like flaming arrows whizzed through the night, drawing a clear boundary between opposing sides. The student protestors demanded strict allegiance and a clear differentiation of black from white. There was no middle ground, only a bitter fight to the death.

Kong Qiu insisted he would take no sick leave, but attending court gradually became a dangerous affair. One day, just as he was preparing to head out despite his exhaustion, he encountered a stranger in the innermost courtyard of his estate. The man brandished a sword and berated him, demanding Kong Qiu atone for his crimes with his life. In his capacity as an esteemed official of the Grand Secretariat, Kong Qiu often received students from out of the city, and had never bothered to set up any true defenses around his residence. To think a day would come when a stranger would hold a sword to his throat in his own home—it was simply the greatest and most ludicrous joke in the world.

It was around this time that Xue Xiuzhuo presented three memorials. Their contents were like a towering wave that crashed down and extinguished the crackling fire, its rolling billows winning the scholars over in one great sweep.

In his first memorial, he spoke of the innumerable hardships he underwent before finally finding the Guangcheng Emperor's long-lost daughter. He not only presented Prince Qin's personal seal as evidence, but also relevant witness testimonies proving the parentage of the girl beyond doubt. He requested an official verification of this evidence right there on the spot.

However, having a woman as emperor was a disruption of the balance of yin and yang, a reversal of the sun and the moon. Such a violation of the natural order had no precedent in hundreds of years. Xue Xiuzhuo's memorial sent the entire imperial court into an uproar. Even Kong Qiu vehemently refuted the notion and refused to consider it.

Thereupon Xue Xiuzhuo presented his second memorial.

He revealed that this girl had been raised in a farming household in Qudu. An exceptionally bright child, she was well-loved by the family. Although they were a poor household, they had been willing to let her older brother teach her to read and write. As a true-born descendant of the Guangcheng Emperor, she naturally differed from the common person. Her family often saw auspicious signs such as rainbows and purple clouds over the house, and thus dared not slight or neglect her, but treated her with utmost attentiveness. The girl was not only intelligent but also kind. When her neighbors were in distress or elderly villagers were starving, she gave away her own food and personally attended to them. The voices from villages near and far were unanimous in their praise of her—this, too, could be corroborated with witness testimony. As for her demeanor and bearing, Xue Xiuzhuo would let the various gentlemen see for themselves when he brought the girl to court.

The contents of this memorial quickly spread beyond the palace walls. Someone posted a copy in the Imperial College, and from there the news made its way to the streets of Qudu. There were fewer things in the world more precious than an emperor's daughter. The only other young lady

who could presently claim such a status in Great Zhou was Third Lady Hua, who had grown up at the empress dowager's side. The contrast between the upbringing of the two—one raised in humble poverty, the other in the luxurious halls of the palace—made the hearts of the common folks ache with sympathy for the girl. Teahouses and wine taverns hosted storytellers who told the legendary tale of this imperial scion living among the people, likening her extraordinary gifts to those of an immortal descended to earth. She came from the masses, brought up by a family descended from generations of farmers—not unlike the current students in the imperial college. She was righteous and benevolent, kind to her neighbors, and keenly able to relate to the hardships of the people. Even the students were carried away by this idealized vision.

It was then that Xue Xiuzhuo submitted his third and most crucial memorial.

In it, he said the girl's elder brother had also been an aspiring scholar. He had previously entered Qudu during the reign of Xiande, but due to prejudice over his humble origins, his name had never made it onto the list of those who passed. After returning home, he wasted away from disappointment. So deep was the affection between the emperor's daughter and her elder brother that this became the source of unbearable distress in her heart. On the way to Qudu, she had asked Xue Xiuzhuo many times about Secretariat Elder Hai's illness. When he spoke of how tirelessly Secretariat Elder Hai had worked tending to state affairs, the girl had shed bitter tears and lamented, "Were I a man, I would never have let the secretariat elder suffer such hardships." Xue Xiuzhuo admitted that even he, a son of common birth from a noble clan, who had been subjected to his own share of harsh treatment on account of his birth, did not possess the same magnanimity of heart as this emperor's daughter; for this failing, he wrote, he felt deeply ashamed.

In closing, Xue Xiuzhuo said that there was no law in the world that decreed priority should be accorded to those of direct descent nor those of noble blood in the selection of court officials, and that similarly, no ancestors had ever said only male children must be considered when it

came to the selection of a prospective sovereign. Regardless, at this stage, the Zhou empire was left with no other choice.

The students were rapturous—they had finally found a suitable candidate. Prejudices over parentage and class were their greatest hurdles to fulfilling their own ambitions. They saw themselves as fellow sufferers, commiserating with the emperor's daughter over her hard lot in life. Li Jianheng had grown up in the lap of luxury. He had no understanding of the hardships of the people and had been repeatedly indicted by the Chief Surveillance Bureau for his pursuit of petty pleasures at the expense of worthwhile aspirations. How different he was from this emperor's daughter, bestowed upon their nation by the heavens. She seemed, in their imaginations, to be the most wonderful woman in the world. She had a heart that bled for the scholars of common origins. She was the Goddess of Mercy who had descended to the mortal realm to deliver the masses from suffering.

And thus, amid a buzz of discussion that lasted an entire night and into the next morning, Xue Xiuzhuo—who had been lying low for so very long—emerged, at last, as the victor.

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Chapter 123:
Yanqing

BY THE TIME Yu Xiaozai finished this tale, the tea on the table had gone cold.

“I can’t understand it,” he said. “The students had been so harsh on the officials from common backgrounds—why would they flock to Xue Xiuzhuo overnight? Don’t tell me Xue Xiuzhuo, a son of the noble Xue Clan, can do more for those from humble families than the commoner Minister Kong of the Cangjun Commandery, who has always been diligent in administering state affairs? The Grand Secretary went to such great trouble to pave the way for us, yet it’s still the noble clans who gained the upper hand in the end.”

Xiao Chiye poured the cooled tea. “Xue Xiuzhuo may not necessarily give the nobles the upper hand,” he commented. “This time, he struck when his opponents were unprepared and caught both sides off guard. The empress dowager went around in circles with Han Cheng for so long because she had no candidate of her own. Clearly Xue Xiuzhuo didn’t leak any word of this girl to the old noble families aligned with the empress dowager. He also allowed his pawn Han Cheng to put himself in a vulnerable position when the late emperor passed away. Xue Xiuzhuo has already offended the noble clans; he understands this better than anyone.”

Yu Xiaozai looked back at him with a worried frown. “I thought about it all the way here, but I still can’t figure out what he means to do. The new emperor will ascend the throne on a shaky foundation, and she’s a woman to boot. Perhaps he did it merely for a moment of glory—but even if the Xue Clan becomes more powerful, how long can Xue Xiuzhuo hold out under pressure from the empress dowager and the rest?”

Shen Zechuan was thinking quickly. “We can’t overlook a single clue if we want to understand this man’s motives. At the Nanlin Hunting Grounds, when Hua Siqian was pressured to revolt against the Xiande Emperor, it was Secretariat Elder Hai and Xue Xiuzhuo who orchestrated

the whole affair. At the time, Xue Xiuzhuo had audited the Ministry of Revenue's accounts in his role as Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue. You say Secretariat Elder Hai mentioned Hua Siqian's malfeasance again just before he died. My guess is that Xue Xiuzhuo was aware of the inside story of the fall of Zhongbo, and this was what allowed him to later join forces with Jiang Qingshan, the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi, to investigate and take down Hua Siqian. This man is not cut from the same cloth as the likes of Wei Huaigu—he has been striking at the noble clans from the very beginning.

"When Xi Hongxuan talked about him, he said Xue Xiuzhuo was always busy with matters of state," Shen Zechuan continued. "After I took office as the northern judge in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, I looked through all the records of cases where the Embroidered Uniform Guard and the Court of Judicial Review investigated in concert. Xue Xiuzhuo did in fact handle many cases after his transfer from the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue to the Court of Judicial Review. Secretariat Elder Hai was an upright person who would never play favorites; his repeated promotion of Xue Xiuzhuo was on Xue Xiuzhuo's own merits. Even Lord Cen mentioned Xue Xiuzhuo's abilities to me on numerous occasions. Everyone seems to agree that his political achievements are outstanding, even among other up-and-coming talents."

Now enlightened, Yu Xiaozai said, "To tell you the truth, Vice Commander, this is just what I can't figure out. All along, Xue Xiuzhuo has had a good reputation. Even the imperial censors from the Chief Surveillance Bureau have hardly any objections to him. The Chief Surveillance Bureau's reviews of him are excellent, or he couldn't have been promoted. But that's why I don't understand the rationale behind his current actions. He's not like Pan Rugui and his ilk, who seized power merely to put money in their own pockets."

Xiao Chiye leaned back and draped his arms over the armrests of his chair. He said to Shen Zechuan, "That's right. We also discussed Xue Xiuzhuo when we were in Qudu. Yao Wenyu said that although Secretariat Elder Hai never accepted him as his pupil, he still held Xue Xiuzhuo in high regard; the secretariat elder even asked him to hold the crown during Yao

Wenyu's coming-of-age ceremony. In the first few years after he took office, the policy essays he wrote focused on doing away with the prejudiced views of the noble clans in the hope that the Imperial College, led by Hua Siqian, might be restored to the glory it enjoyed in Grand Preceptor Yao's day. With the exception of Hai Liangyi, the Grand Secretariat at the time, as well as the Six Ministries beneath it, were almost entirely composed of officials from noble clans. For a long time, officials in Qudu were appointed solely based on their family name. Even the illiterate thirteenth son of the Hua Clan could take up a post in the Ministry of War and interfere with the Imperial Army's affairs. Meanwhile, Kong Qiu was toiling away in the lower ranks of the Ministry of Justice, while Liang Cuishan, whom you yourself recommended for advancement, was repeatedly demoted within the Ministry of Revenue, with no hope of promotion."

Shen Zechuan nodded slowly. "The fact that Xue Xiuzhuo held the post of Chief Supervising Secretary of the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue at the time was an indication of Hua Siqian's desire to get him out of the way. The Chief Supervising Secretary was theoretically an important post that gave Xue Xiuzhuo direct access to the emperor. But at the time, the Xiande Emperor was not in control of his own court. Hua Siqian, as the leader of the Grand Secretariat, had the final say over what Xue Xiuzhuo could accomplish in that position. It's during this period that we begin to see a change in Xue Xiuzhuo's approach. He stepped back from his radical rhetoric and kept a low profile—thus becoming the person we're all familiar with now."

The longer Yu Xiaozai listened, the more alarmed he became. "But if he shares the same goals as the scholar-officials, why didn't he reach out to us? Then, was Han Cheng…"

"He put everything into toppling Hua Siqian and Pan Rugui in the incident leading up to Li Jianheng's ascension," Shen Zechuan explained. "But he very quickly realized that Li Jianheng was not bold, decisive, or visionary enough for him. Li Jianheng was constantly caught in the tug of war between various interests. And the scholar-officials of common origins,

even under Secretariat Elder Hai's leadership, failed to remove the influence of the empress dowager."

Shen Zechuan turned his head aside; the little jade bead on his right ear was eclipsed by shadow. "A great part of the Imperial College students' dissatisfaction with the scholar-officials was their weakness in standing up to the noble clans. This is likely also the reason Xue Xiuzhuo no longer trusts these officials of common origins. Secretariat Elder Hai's conservative approach kept Great Zhou from falling apart at the seams, yet it also gave the noble clans a chance to catch their breath. The noble clans feed on one another—
you saw how Wei Huaigu's fall made way for Han Cheng's rise. This was not the result Xue Xiuzhuo wished for." Shen Zechuan stopped and narrowed his eyes. "No wonder he wanted Xiansheng so badly."

Qi Huilian had long been a guiding light for the radicals—those in favor of complete political turnover. He had achieved great things in the Eastern Palace. In the short time before the crown prince's untimely demise, Qi Huilian accomplished such feats as establishing the Yellow Register—a victory he likely owed in part to the diligence of the Eastern Palace's subordinates in discharging their duties, and their tenacity in forging ahead regardless of public opinion. If Xue Xiuzhuo wanted to break away from the conciliatory approach that characterized Hai Liangyi's era, that he would seek Qi Huilian's help seemed of a piece.

Yet Qi Huilian had refused, and Xue Xiuzhuo had handed him over to Han Cheng.

Shen Zechuan pressed his lips into a thin line. In the candlelight, his profile was cold and detached. "He'll stop at nothing to achieve his goals. This man puts faith in no one but himself. He is counting on the new emperor to prop up the Zhou empire—for this, he doesn't hesitate to offend the conservative noble clans. He wishes to bring new blood into Qudu and overhaul the system. We helped take down Wei Huaigu and others in Qudu, yet their fall has merely opened vacancies into which he can install his own people. Lord Yu, you were wrong. His memorial moved the hearts of the empire's students not because the emperor's daughter sounded wonderful, but because his last sentence did."

There is no law in the world that decreed priority should be accorded to those of direct descent nor those of noble blood in the selection of court officials!

The noble clans dominated the upper echelons of government and kept a stranglehold on the imperial court of Great Zhou. The reigning emperor's assertiveness—or the lack thereof—dictated whether those from common backgrounds were able to break through the blockade of those eight family names. The common officials had been at a nadir since the latter years of the Yongyi era; it had been too long since they'd tasted any true victories. What they desperately needed was a sovereign well-disposed towards scholars of common backgrounds. Male or female, it mattered not—as long as this candidate was able to rouse the hearts of the humble scholars, inspire their confidence, and shoulder the weight of their expectations after the successive passing of Qi Huilian and Hai Liangyi, they would be embraced by the students of the Imperial College.

The empress dowager's long reign had not only intensified the ostracism they faced. It had amplified the weakness and incompetence of the Li Clan's emperors, an impression that had taken firm root in the minds of the masses. The students had been so harsh on Kong Qiu and Cen Yu because they could no longer endure the repeated compromises these officials made in the current imperial court. Hai Liangyi, who had conceded his entire career, had given his life in one final remonstration. Why must Kong Qiu go on conceding? The chance to reform the world was within their grasp. Failing to act now was tantamount to a dereliction of duty.

But was this really the moment? Shen Zechuan thought otherwise.

Why had Hai Liangyi chosen to make concession after concession to the noble clans? Because these clans had long become a chronic disease infecting Great Zhou. They ought to have scraped the bones and cauterized the wounds as early as during the Yongyi years, yet they'd dragged their feet, and Zhongbo fell before Hai Liangyi could make his move. The empire had resembled a feeble man in his twilight years, set upon and kicked by thieves until he choked on blood. It was hard for cuts and bruises to heal, and even harder for internal injuries to mend themselves. In the moments before his death, Hai Liangyi had questioned the imperial court—

he had asked if this was everyone’s fault for allowing this degeneracy. Had he included himself, too?

If he hadn’t pushed Hua Siqian so hard back then—if he had been more diplomatic in his handling of things…

Would Zhongbo have avoided the tragedy of the Biansha massacre?

Hai Liangyi would never know. But this incident directly affected the way he led the administration in the later years of the Xiande Emperor’s reign. He adopted an attitude of appeasement, attempting a softer influence. He never dared act so rashly again; he moved with a constant awareness of the risks of the political situation he was mired in. But these were considerations the fledgling students could not understand.

Perhaps Xue Xiuzhuo did not have the power to dictate the direction in which the empire’s students would move—he was a fisherman balancing amid the stormy waves, trying to discern the optimal moment to cast his net. This man hadn’t crawled through the mud of the imperial court for so many years just to return empty-handed. He understood the resentment between the common scholars and the court officials better than Shen Zechuan. The flames of war had been ignited by others before his time, and the sparks now flying had kindled the same fire in those who followed in their steps.

Xue Xiuzhuo had repeatedly beseeched Hai Liangyi to formally accept him as his student, to no avail. He later took desperate measures to force Qi Huilian to help him, yet still he failed. He was a stubborn rock amid a battle between two parties, destined to cut his own bloody path out. He was a merciless character who would not spare even himself.

A fierce light gleamed in Shen Zechuan’s eyes. He felt that he had been thwarted. He had been driven out of Qudu like a dog with its tail between its legs, defenseless and beaten half to death.

Xue Xiuzhuo had tossed Xi Hongxuan aside at exactly the right time, then emptied the Xi Clan’s silver vaults before Shen Zechuan could make his move. He had long been preparing for this day. And what had Shen Zechuan been doing at that time? He had still been naively thinking he could rely on his silver tongue to drive a wedge between the noble clans.

On reflection, Xue Xiuzhuo had revealed his might as early as the scandal regarding the Imperial Army's misrecorded silk.

Shen Zechuan had been defeated in this battle. But since he was still alive, he would fight this war to the end. As the one who had inherited Qi Huilian's life's work, he couldn't accept being defeated again and again. They had already fled from the sheltered walls of Qudu to the crumbling frontier torn by war. He had to find his footing fast, or there would be no place left for him in these turbulent times. There were no weaklings among the up-and-coming talents of the land; all watched the developing situation ravenously, like a tiger eyeing its prey. If he wished to sit down and calmly debate ideals, he first had to win the right to a seat at the table.

Xiao Chiye looked at Shen Zechuan's silent profile and asked Yu Xiaozai, "Have you seen the girl emperor?"

Yu Xiaozai was in the middle of fishing the letter Cen Yu had written out of his robes. His hand stilled. "Not yet. When I left Qudu, the Ministry of Rites was starting their preparations for the coronation. The empress dowager wanted to summon the emperor's daughter for a meeting, but Xue Xiuzhuo declined."

Xiao Chiye tapped the armrest gently. "Sounds like he isn't completely confident of success either. We'll have to wait and see—it may be that this girl emperor he raised in four short years is no more than a paper tiger that will topple at the first touch. I'd like to see how long he thinks she can bluff Qudu."

Shen Zechuan shook off his abstraction and composed himself. "Let's just hope she isn't another Li Jianheng."

Restless, Xiao Chiye straightened and asked Yu Xiaozai, "We still don't know what her official name will be. If they're going to write her into the imperial family tree, will she go down as Li Jianting?"

A strange expression came over Yu Xiaozai's face. "That's the name all right." He wrote on the mat with his finger, one stroke at a time. "But the *Jian* character is not the same generational character shared with the late emperor, nor the *Ting* of her commoner name. It's written like this."

Stroke by stroke, two characters emerged: *sword* and *thunder.* Shocked, Shen Zechuan exchanged glances with Xiao Chiye.

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Chapter 124:
The Die is Cast

THE SKY had begun to pale with the first glimmer of dawn. Yu Xiaozai was, after all, a scholar and not a soldier; it was no easy feat for him to stay awake so long. Shen Zechuan called Chen Yang to lead Yu Xiaozai to a room to rest. They could always ask their remaining questions another day.

Yu Xiaozai gratefully withdrew from the room, leaving the letter Cen Yu had written on the table.

Xiao Chiye went off to bathe, while Shen Zechuan read Cen Yu's letter by candlelight. The first rays of daylight from the courtyard seeped into the room. When Shen Zechuan reached the part about the Bianjun Commandery, he hesitated, but Xiao Chiye still hadn't returned. He slid the letter into his robes, lifted the bamboo curtain, and walked along the narrow corridor to the inner chamber, stepping around the standing screen for a look. Xiao Chiye was soaking in the pool, fast asleep.

He had only been a little tired, silently contemplating a few things as he soaked, yet had unexpectedly fallen asleep. A sudden chill on his cheek woke him up.

Shen Zechuan scooped more water and washed Xiao Chiye's cheek again. "The water's gone cold. Go sleep in your bed."

Xiao Chiye rose, sending droplets scattering, and threw a robe over his shoulders. He lowered his head and buried his face in Shen Zechuan's chest, nuzzling against him until Shen Zechuan's entire front was wet. "Carry me," he mumbled.

Shen Zechuan pinched the nape of Xiao Chiye's neck. "Aren't you asking the impossible?"

"Then I'll carry you instead."

Shen Zechuan kicked off his shoes and looped his arms around Xiao Chiye's neck, heedless of the water soaking his sleeves. "Go on then," he

drawled.

Xiao Chiye pressed his forehead against Shen Zechuan's and wrapped his arms around him. "I saw the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds. They're not bad. With some tidying, they'll make a decent military camp, but the watchtowers need rebuilding. It all costs money."

The lamps were not lit here, and the dimness made the very air feel secretive and intimate. Shen Zechuan's face was less than an inch from Xiao Chiye's as he said, "The city of Dancheng lies just to the west of the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds. If we're to face the Eight Great Battalions again in the future, we can't skimp on this place."

"There's no rush." Xiao Chiye picked Shen Zechuan up with ease and carried him into their bedroom.

Shen Zechuan knew Xiao Chiye didn't intend to use his stash of Xi Clan silver, and Cizhou could not feed the Imperial Army forever. What was more, Xiao Chiye planned to return to Libei soon, and to lack money was to lack confidence. He was likely still contemplating the problem himself.

"Cen Yu went to all that trouble to send Yu Xiaozai with a letter for you. He must want a favor." Xiao Chiye climbed into bed. Without bothering to take off his robe, he leaned back against the pillow with Shen Zechuan in his arms and rested his chin atop Shen Zechuan's head. "What is it?"

Pillowing his head against Xiao Chiye's chest, Shen Zechuan reached for the letter and finished reading it. He folded it up and answered, "Cen Yu hopes you can give everyone another chance and act as a bridge between Qudu and Libei."

Eyes half-closed, Xiao Chiye said, "They must really need the help if they're willing to lower themselves like this. If the Grand Secretariat and the empress dowager make peace in the future, Libei will have to send another hostage to the capital. It'll either be me or Xun-er." This matter was non-negotiable. His brother's son was already six years old, but Xiao Chiye had yet to meet him. This, however, did not prevent him from doting on his nephew.

Shen Zechuan softened his voice. “Cen Yu is aware that this will be difficult to achieve. He hopes I’ll head south to Qidong and convince Qi Zhuyin to break off the marriage alliance between Hua and Qi.”

“Cen Yu spends all his time in Qudu—he doesn’t know how things stand in Qidong. The grand marshal has no say in anything relating to this marriage alliance,” Xiao Chiye said. “It’s Qi Shiyu who’s set to marry Hua Xiangyi, not Qi Zhuyin. Qi Shiyu is a wily old fox; he sensed the wind changing a while ago. He doesn’t want Qidong to follow in Libei’s footsteps, so he’s hoping to strengthen ties with Qudu through marriage.”

As he spoke, Xiao Chiye’s voice faded into a murmur. “What can Cen Yu and the rest offer Qi Shiyu now? With Hai Liangyi’s death and the girl emperor’s coronation, any past promises have become worthless. They have no bargaining chips they can use to convince Qi Shiyu…”

Shen Zechuan counted in silence for a few beats, then turned to look at him. Sure enough, Xiao Chiye had fallen back asleep. Shen Zechuan unfolded the letter once more. His eyes lingered on the word *Bianjun* for a moment before he closed it again. He had left that matter out; he wanted to allow Xiao Chiye a good night’s rest.

Xue Xiuzhuo, however, was not sleeping.

He had been spending nights in his study for several days in a row. His story about the emperor’s daughter might convince the students, but it did not impress the shrewd and experienced officials of the imperial court. Kong Qiu, feeling that the blow Xue Xiuzhuo had dealt the Grand Secretariat by taking such advantage of the circumstances was not the behavior of a gentleman, had submitted several consecutive memorials protesting the empress dowager’s tacit acceptance of the girl. All of them sank like rocks into the sea—he received no response.

A conniving, ambitious man with grand designs.

Furious with how wrong he’d been about Xue Xiuzhuo, Kong Qiu threw those words in his face and refused to say anything more.

Whether or not the emperor's daughter ascended the throne, the imperial court officials led by Kong Qiu had gained absolutely no ground in this battle. They had lost their anchoring pillar in the fight, then seen Han Cheng defeated at last only for Xue Xiuzhuo to swoop in out of nowhere. To add insult to injury, Xue Xiuzhuo didn't even manage to deliver an imperial son, but a *daughter*. Everything they had done had been in vain.

Still, Cen Yu did not concede defeat—the pushback from the imperial censors was far more intense than Xue Xiuzhuo had expected it to be. If Xue Xiuzhuo thought Great Zhou had reached a point where it would let a woman ascend the throne, was he not implying that the empire had come to the end of the road, destined for doom? Only then could such a reversal of natural order, an inversion of right and wrong be allowed to take place.

Qi Zhuyin had met with obstacles every step of the way simply to be conferred the title of grand marshal. Now, as the Ministry of Rites pored over book after book determining details regarding the coronation of the emperor's daughter, they found there were simply too many areas where they had nothing to reference at all. The sounds of castigation in the imperial court never ceased, and memorials impeaching Xue Xiuzhuo soon numbered in the dozens.

"Are real men nowhere to be found?" Pan Lin had finally found his footing in the Ministry of Revenue after years of diligent work. As a descendant of one of the old-school noble clans and the son of Pan Xiangjie, he had the most intense reaction in the court. "In all its hundred years, Great Zhou has never had a female heir apparent! The principles of heaven are the laws of nature. Although the common-born descendant of Prince Yan has passed, he still has descendants of his own. If the royal bloodline is hard to find, Her Majesty can stand in temporarily for the Son of Heaven. We will keep searching!"

Xue Xiuzhuo stood alone in the middle of these two polarized groups of officials and said in a steady voice, "The remaining descendants of Prince Yan are the children of his daughters, and do not carry the imperial surname. Do you intend that the Li Clan's empire will change its surname along with its ruler? It is indeed justified for the empress dowager to act on

behalf of the Son of Heaven when necessary. But if the harem can lead the administration, why is a female heir impossible?”

“You are distorting the facts!” Cen Yu whirled on Xue Xiuzhuo. “The empress dowager acts on behalf of the Son of Heaven; she does not take his place. As soon as an imperial heir ascends the throne, the harem will return the power to its rightful master! But if the emperor’s daughter ascends the throne and gives birth to a male heir in the future, will she also return the power?!”

Han Cheng was livid. He understood, deep down, that he too had been duped by Xue Xiuzhuo. The empress dowager and all these old noble clans were dissatisfied because the attitude Xue Xiuzhuo displayed was not one of compliant submission. He held the emperor’s daughter firmly in his grasp: Should she sit on the throne, he would undoubtedly influence court administration and state affairs. To those old guards, this was a betrayal.

Seeing as the empress dowager, sitting behind that beaded curtain, still had yet to speak, Han Cheng added his voice. “The emperor’s daughter has long been confined to lady’s chambers. How can she be expected to assume the incredible responsibility of managing state affairs? In my opinion, the empress dowager should continue to lead the administration after the coronation.”

On hearing this, Kong Qiu was ready to throw up his hands and quit. The whole situation was one big, sticky mess. At present, none of the parties could be satisfied. They were all unhappy with the prospect of the emperor’s daughter taking the throne; one side would be displeased if the empress dowager continued to head the administration, but if they went ahead with the advisory chamber of the eight cities, that would upset the students!

Kong Qiu was on the verge of falling to his knees and begging the heavens to drop an imperial prince from the sky. They must’ve been blind ten years ago not to urge the Guangcheng Emperor to beget more sons. If there were a real imperial heir, they would never have found themselves in such a predicament to begin with.

Xue Xiuzhuo pointed at the old stone inscription outside the hall. “Our ancestors explicitly said ‘the harem shall not interfere with politics,’ not ‘the emperor’s daughter shall not lead the administration.’ Since the various gentlemen here are so critical of me, then I shall venture to ask: What, in your opinion, should be done? Do we oust the emperor’s daughter and install an emperor of another surname? Or do we leave the throne empty and allow the empress dowager to lead the court indefinitely?!”

A loud buzz rose in the hall, but no one stepped forward with a definitive answer. It had been the same when they appointed Li Jianheng as the heir apparent. It was as if they stood on a sharp precipice, afraid to take a step in either direction.

Had Xue Xiuzhuo come forward a few days earlier and revealed that he had the emperor’s daughter in his care, the empress dowager and the Grand Secretariat together might have come up with an appropriate strategy against him and still been willing to treat him cordially. Yet he had insisted on pinning everyone by the throat like this, attempting to seize complete control. He had both the emperor’s daughter as his trump card, and public opinion to back him up. Who would dare lay a hand on him now?

Kong Qiu considered the lay of the land and gave in. Such a stalemate benefitted neither the empire nor the court. “There is something the commander said which I find true: The emperor’s daughter has been cloistered in her living quarters for a long time. Even if she takes the throne, she will need to study the classics and take imperial lessons in history, governance, geography, and more. In the interim, the empress dowager will continue to lead the administration with the assistance of the Grand Secretariat.”

On this, the scholar-officials had to stand firm at all costs. They had to become the authority that determined if the emperor’s daughter was fit to participate in state affairs. Kong Qiu’s intent was clear: She would be ready only when the Grand Secretariat deemed her to be so. Otherwise, she would remain a student sitting on the throne. To the empress dowager, this was also a kind of threat. If the empress dowager dared support the Han Clan as she had the Hua and Pan Clans during the reign of Yongyi, the Grand

Secretariat would immediately put the emperor's daughter in charge of the administration and force the empress dowager back into the inner palace.

The empress dowager sat in silence behind the beaded curtain for a long time. At last, she said, "Acting on behalf of the emperor has had me feeling uneasy day and night. Since there is now a candidate for the throne, it is indeed inappropriate for me to continue. After the coronation, I shall retreat to my meditations before the Buddha and remove myself from the public eye."

She yielded as a ploy to advance; those present could only kneel and say in unison, "Your Majesty is the matriarch of the realm. You mustn't put your esteemed self down!"

Xue Xiuzhuo knelt among them, his back drenched in sweat as he kowtowed. Surprisingly, he did not refute Kong Qiu's proposal.

Xiao Chiye was bursting with energy after a night's rest. After finishing his breakfast, he sat cross-legged under the eaves, feeding Meng. When Shen Zechuan broke the news that Bianjun had revolted, he and Meng turned their heads to look at him as one.

Yu Xiaozai knelt off to the side. On seeing this, he said hastily, "I was shocked when I heard it too. General Lu comes from a long line of loyal military men; how could he have turned? Minister Kong requested at once that the Ministry of War check on the state of military affairs in Bianjun, while the Embroidered Uniform Guard interrogated the military inspector eunuch sent there. It took nearly a month for them to learn that the provisions Bianjun received during the supply disaster were moldy."

Xiao Chiye was still stunned. He bolted to his feet, blocking the light inside the room. "Moldy? Back then, the instructions were to reduce Qidong's military provisions by half. No one said anything about letting them pass off adulterated grain as quality provisions."

The military situation in Libei had been critical at the time, but Bianjun also had to fight Biansha. No matter how anxious Xiao Chiye had been over Libei, he would never have let anyone stuff Lu Guangbai's granaries with moldy rice. He had dispatched Chen Yang and Gu Jin to

supervise the transport of Libei's grain precisely because he worried someone would tamper with their provisions again; he had never expected someone would make a move on Bianjun instead.

"No wonder the marshal has yet to come after me." Xiao Chiye raised his arm to let Meng perch there. His expression was grave. "If she lost Lu Guangbai, Qudu wouldn't dare send her north to confront us just yet —she's needed to fill the gap in Bianjun. But Lu Guangbai…"

This was Lu Guangbai they were talking about!

Xiao Chiye's heart sank. "The twenty thousand soldiers in Bianjun are all infantry. If Lu Guangbai went east, there's nowhere to go but the desert. The desert is the Biansha Horsemen's territory. Outside Bianjun, he will lose the advantage of laying ambushes in the terrain. He'll have to change his style of fighting. Why didn't he head for Suotian Pass instead?!"

Either Suotian Pass or Tianfei Watchtower would've been a safer choice. Suotian Pass was manned by troops who belonged to the old Feng Clan, and men in both of these places had once fought under Zuo Qianqiu. Zuo Qianqiu was now a general in Libei, and Lu Guangbai's sister, Lu Yizhi, was Xiao Jiming's wife. No one would mistreat him if he went there.

Why did he decide to head east?

The only thing waiting in the desert was the Twelve Tribes of Biansha.

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Chapter 125:
Meng and Yu

BY THE END of the sixth month, Cizhou's garrison troops were beginning to take shape, and it was time for Xiao Chiye to continue his journey north. Not once had he sent a personal letter to Libei in the two months he had remained in Zhongbo; likewise, he had received no letter from his family in Libei.

Meng began to spend more and more time out hunting. Xiao Chiye knew he was flying north.

As he stood in the courtyard watching the sunset, Shen Zechuan rapped lightly on the door frame behind him. Xiao Chiye looked back at him in the last rays of warm light.

Xiao Chiye seemed to have grown a little taller again, and he was far sturdier than he had been six years ago, his broad shoulders bearing the full weight of the sinking sun. Shen Zechuan watched him until Xiao Chiye turned slightly aside. "Let's go riding."

Unlike the last time he'd suggested riding together in Qudu, Xiao Chiye was serious about the horsemanship. He led Shen Zechuan up to Snowcrest and explained everything in great detail, from how to sit on the saddle to how to direct with the reins. It was as if he wanted to leave everything to Shen Zechuan—his horse, his falcon, his heart.

The two men rode northward, Shen Zechuan sitting before Xiao Chiye in the saddle as they trotted along the forested paths outside the city of Cizhou. They rode until the last of the sun slipped beneath the horizon and stars adorned the great vault of the night sky above them.

The mountains north of the city were lush with vegetation. Snowcrest ran up the nearest slope. Xiao Chiye reined in the horse and said to Shen Zechuan through the wind, "The Hongyan Mountains lie just there."

Shen Zechuan looked out into the distance. On this cloudy night, the sky stretched out in all directions above them. He could vaguely make out a

suggestion of the tall, jagged peaks of the Hongyan Mountains. They looked like a dragon lying at the edge of the horizon, drawing a meandering demarcation line at the very edge of the Zhou empire. From Zhongbo, its great contours could be seen, but not reached. This mountain range nourished the vast expanse of land north of Great Zhou; it was a natural wall built from the very earth of Libei.

Shen Zechuan heard the howl of the wind—a wind entirely unlike the winds of Qudu. It sent the sleeves of his robe fluttering like a white bird spreading its wings.

“This is the call of the Hongyan Mountains. They miss me too. As we get closer to Libei, we’ll be able to hear the song of the wind even more clearly.” Xiao Chiye spurred Snowcrest into a gallop. They jolted, faces to the wind, shooting across the billows of wild grass like a bird swooping toward the Hongyan Mountains. Meng flapped his wings and soared after them. He wheeled in the air and swooped down, drawing a dark line through the grass as he swept past.

Xiao Chiye said in Shen Zechuan’s ear, “I want to take you there to see it.”

The puff of breath from Xiao Chiye’s lips warmed the little jade earring on Shen Zechuan’s ear. Looking out at the horizon, he said, “Xiao Ce’an—”

Xiao Chiye cocked his head. Shen Zechuan spoke, but the wind snatched the words away; Xiao Chiye couldn’t hear him clearly. He leaned in closer and motioned for Shen Zechuan to repeat himself.

Instead, Shen Zechuan said, “We’ll cross the border if we keep going!”

“Then so be it.” Xiao Chiye’s hands were slack on the reins. “I’m taking you home to meet my old man and elder brother—what did you say just now?”

Shen Zechuan shouted in the wind, “I said, *Where—is—my—fan?!*”

He scooped Shen Zechuan into his arms and pulled back hard on the reins, sending Snowcrest rearing up with a whinny. The world turned upside

down, and Shen Zechuan heard a muffled thud even before he felt the impact of the drop. The two men tumbled and rolled in the grass along the slope.

Xiao Chiye wrapped his arms around Shen Zechuan to shield him from the fall. When they came to a stop, he didn't get up; he remained under Shen Zechuan and spread his arms wide. "You're lying to me."

Shen Zechuan pinched his cheek. "When did I lie?"

Xiao Chiye stared up at Shen Zechuan and huffed, "You're lying. Liar. Scoundrel. Heartless cad—"

Shen Zechuan pulled up a handful of grass and threw it onto Xiao Chiye's face. Xiao Chiye didn't dodge, but stretched out his arms and embraced Shen Zechuan, holding him tight to his chest as he said wickedly, "Even if I die, I'll die with you."

He pressed Shen Zechuan's face into the crook of his own neck. Shen Zechuan struggled, but he couldn't break free. He said in a muffled voice, "Xiao Er, if you suffocate me, you'll be murdering your own husband."

"Repeat what you said earlier," Xiao Chiye said.

Shen Zechuan gasped for air and finally managed to peek out from under Xiao Chiye's broad palm. Sweetly, he said, "Xiao Er, you're suffocating—"

"Shen Zechuan!" Xiao Chiye hissed resentfully. He rubbed briskly at Shen Zechuan's head until his cheeks were flushed red and his hair was hopelessly tousled, not at all like the composed Vice Commander Shen.

Bits of grass stuck in Shen Zechuan's mouth. "Huh?"

Xiao Chiye cupped Shen Zechuan's cheeks and raised his head to kiss him, yet just as their lips were about to touch, he stopped and said sternly, "Kiss me."

Shen Zechuan was trapped against Xiao Chiye's chest with his head tilted up. After enduring it for a moment, he said, "Let me up then."

"Nope," Xiao Chiye said. "Think of a way yourself."

Unable to strain up to reach him, Shen Zechuan pursed his lips, grabbed the front of Xiao Chiye's robes, and yanked him over, pecking him on the lips.

Xiao Chiye's expression remained unchanged. Shen Zechuan was still struggling, so Xiao Chiye surged up and kissed him so hard Shen Zechuan reared back, and his bites were just as merciless as his kiss. Shen Zechuan arced backward with Xiao Chiye's arms locked tight around his waist, feeling a stab of pain in his neck from Xiao Chiye's canines. He sucked in a breath and narrowed his eyes.

In no time at all, the tables had turned, and Shen Zechuan was pressed deep into the grass. He could see the great expanse of the boundless, starry sky as Xiao Chiye entered him. Small sounds he couldn't suppress escaped his lips. He grabbed a lock of Xiao Chiye's hair and wound it tight around his fingers as they tensed and curled. The stars dazzled his eyes before scattering into pieces on the wind. He gazed up at Xiao Chiye, a little dizzy, feeling that this wolf pup was much fiercer than usual.

"Xiao Er…" Shen Zechuan dragged out the syllables.

Xiao Chiye bent down, enveloping him, blocking out the wind and stars. "I love you."

He seemed to have fallen in love with such whisperings lately. The closer he was to home, the more often he acted like a child. He took possession of Shen Zechuan and was taken by Shen Zechuan in turn. He was not stingy with such declarations of love. Each time he said the words, he felt Shen Zechuan clench hard around him, trembling despite himself.

Shen Zechuan sighed and moaned, clinging to Xiao Chiye amid fragmented murmurs as Xiao Chiye indulged with wild abandon at the doorstep of Libei. Only the two of them knew of the desires to which they surrendered themselves beneath their seemingly intact clothes. With his back to the Hongyan Mountains, amid the enchanting whistles of the wind, Xiao Chiye revealed how feral and domineering he could be.

Gradually, Shen Zechuan forgot all about the silver river overhead as he kissed Xiao Chiye. Xiao Chiye's passion sent Shen Zechuan soaring

amid the clouds and sinking back into the embrace of the wind, before eventually melting into the waiting cradle of Xiao Chiye's arms.

When Shen Zechuan awoke, day was beginning to break. Thin rays of morning sunlight shone through the gaps in the bamboo blinds. He stretched a hand out and felt the fading warmth on the empty bed beside him. Xiao Chiye had gone out of the city, leaving his old robe still hanging on the rack. A small cone of incense burned in the room to repel mosquitoes. The heat from their lovemaking still lingered on Shen Zechuan's skin.

Shen Zechuan spread his arms wide, taking up the space of both of them. Instead of closing his eyes again, he suddenly propped himself up, scrambled into his clothes and wooden clogs, and pushed the door open to the veranda outside.

"Quick." The redness at the corners of Shen Zechuan's eyes was apparent as he hoarsely told Ding Tao, "Send someone to take the new pair of armguards to Ce'an before he gets too far."

Dispirited at having been left behind, Ding Tao had been sitting cross-legged at the edge of the small pond, drawing in his book to vent his feelings. When he heard Shen Zechuan's voice behind him, he leapt to his feet and started off without even stashing away his brush. The sharp-eyed Qiao Tianya deftly caught hold of his collar and said to Shen Zechuan, "The marquis took them with him."

The chill of the morning air had dispelled Shen Zechuan's drowsiness. He clicked his wooden clog lightly against the ground, nodded, and made to return to the room when Qiao Tianya added, "But he only took one. He said to keep the other for Master."

Shen Zechuan stood still for a moment without saying a word. The sun was already up, so he did not intend to return to bed. "How many men from the Imperial Army did he leave behind?"

"Two thousand," Qiao Tianya answered. "All at the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds."

“Prepare the register of names. The Imperial Army cannot be mixed with the soldiers from Cizhou.” Shen Zechuan tugged at the front of his robe. “Mister Chengfeng wanted to discuss the sale and purchase of grain between Cizhou and Chazhou in detail. Go tell him we will discuss it today.”

Apparently in no rush to leave, Qiao Tianya fished out a letter from the front of his robe. “Master, you got a letter from Ge Qingqing in Juexi.”

“Excellent timing,” Shen Zechuan said. “Is the Xi Clan’s fleet in the Port of Yongyi in good order? Officially, the Xi Clan’s businesses have nothing to do with us, so any surface-level investigations into our doings oughtn’t involve them. Xue Xiuzhuo emptied the coffers of silver, but he left all these lucrative shops to us. I doubt he did so willingly.”

“There are no signs of activity from Qudu. Even if Xue Xiuzhuo’s plans are foolproof, he can’t be in two places at once. He’s got no one to handle those shops in Juexi for him.” Qiao Tianya released Ding Tao. “Ge Qingqing writes that Qudu wasn’t the one who made trouble for him—it was the Yan Clan of Hezhou.”

The Yan Clan of Hezhou owned the waterways of Chazhou. They were prominent merchants who operated south of Qudu. Lei Changming had been able to establish his brigade of bandits only thanks to the Yan Clan backing Lei Jingzhe. Shen Zechuan had been thinking about them since learning this, and was not surprised to hear their name now.

“I know very little about the Yan Clan,” Shen Zechuan said. “It doesn’t seem much is known about them in Qudu, either.”

Ding Tao jumped up in excitement. “Gongzi, this I know! Lei Jingzhe’s backer is the current head of the Yan Clan, a man by the name of Yan Heru. Rumor has it that he’s a peacock who refuses to go out without a sedan chair worth its weight in gold. He doesn’t only dress in gold; even the abacus he carries with him is made of gold and jade! He’s very, very, *very* rich!”

In his haste, Ding Tao’s words all ran together, so he lifted his little book and showed it to Shen Zechuan. On the page was scrawled a little

figure holding an abacus, decked out in copper coins all over—
a half-informed sketch of a very wealthy man.

“Where did you hear all this?” Qiao Tianya asked.

Ding Tao pointed in the direction of the jail. “Master brought home a silly kid when they caught all those bandits. He’s almost as tall as Jin-ge, and incredibly strong. I got all this out of him with just a few sweets. He’s naive enough that he’ll spill everything if you give him some food.”

Shen Zechuan vaguely remembered Xiao Chiye mentioning this youth. “Weren’t the rest of the bandits sent back?”

“Yeah.” Ding Tao nodded. “But not him. Master said he doesn’t have the brains to survive among the bandits if he returns, so we might as well keep him here with us.”

Shen Zechuan had more questions about the Yan clan. “Bring him here,” he said.

Zhao Hui fed the falcons at dawn. He held up his arm to them one at a time and let them perch on his armguard while he fed them meat. Anywhere else, there would be a servant assigned to the mews, but when it came to Xiao Chiye’s generation, they preferred to do it themselves; they all raised the falcons they had personally tamed.

When Zhao Hui fed Yu, Xiao Jiming’s falcon, he discovered that the bird’s back had been badly scratched, and there was a bald spot where several feathers had been pulled out.

“What happened here?” Zhao Hui brought Yu closer and pushed aside its feathers for a look. He asked the soldier at his side, “Did it fight something?”

The soldier holding the leather bag of meat strips walked a few steps beside Zhao Hui. “I couldn’t say, General. It went out hunting a few days back, and when it came back from the south, it was wounded like this. I had the medic look at it, and he said those scratches were made by the talons of another bird of prey.”

Yu was a gyrfalcon, and one of the larger birds among the flocks in Libei. Xiao Fangxu had been first to tame it, but he had later given the bird to Xiao Jiming. It had followed Xiao Jiming into battle for the last few years and never been on the losing end against the saker falcons of the Hanma tribe.

Zhao Hui studied the wound. “How strange. Whose falcon is this ferocious—?”

A thought jolted through Zhao Hui’s mind, and he whipped his head around to the south. The wind was as strong as ever, but there were no traces of gyrfalcons circling in the skies.

The sky of Libei was as blue as ever.

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Chapter 126:
Li Xiong

LI XIONG was just as his name suggested—a bear cub. By this point he'd been in the prison nearly half a month, spending his days sitting cross-legged with his face to the bars, looking helplessly at the door as he waited for Lei Jingzhe to come for him. Due to his youth, the jailers all loved to gently tease him. He was a strong but simple boy who was slow to anger even when prodded, but he had a terrifying appetite and could eat a meal meant for three in one sitting.

When the jailer opened the cell door, a shackled Li Xiong asked urgently, "Has my dage come to get me?"

The warden clapped Li Xiong on the back but said nothing. Qiao Tianya had arranged for a horse carriage to pick Li Xiong up. Fearing the boy might stir up trouble on the way, the jailer made a special point of securing the fetters around Li Xiong's ankles.

Li Xiong was not used to riding in the carriage, and all the swaying made him dizzy. Finally it stopped, but when he got out and saw the entrance of the manor, he refused to move his feet.

"I'm not going in." Li Xiong stood in place like a stake nailed into the ground. No matter how they pushed and shoved him, he wouldn't budge an inch. "This place is too big. Dage won't be able to find me if I go inside."

The heat today was oppressive, and everyone was sweating profusely just standing there. The jailer, overcome with anxiety at the prospect of offending his higher-ups, attempted to hoodwink Li Xiong: "Go in for now, and we'll bring you out in a little while."

Li Xiong thought this man, with his weasel-like eyes that shifted from side to side when he spoke, looked like a liar. He shook his head sullenly and refused to take a step forward. After trying to persuade him again to no avail, the jailer steeled himself and squeezed in with the others to push at Li Xiong's back in an attempt to heave him inside by force.

The youth’s heels scraped across the ground. Annoyed at the pushing, Li Xiong squared his shoulders and bellowed, “I’m not going in! Nope!”

Startled, the men behind him flinched back a step. The jailer saw him flailing and worried the shackles wouldn’t hold; he barked out, “Hold him down! Don’t let him make a scene out here!”

Li Xiong saw them lunging toward him and reacted instinctively. He took a wide-legged stance, making himself as steady as a mountain while his suntanned face contorted with fury. The jailer grabbed him and strained to the limit to push him forward, but Li Xiong didn’t budge in the slightest. It seemed they were going to be late, unable to even get past the entrance.

At this moment, Ji Gang happened to return from his stroll with a birdcage in hand and Fei Sheng at his side. Even from afar, he saw the crowd at the gates and the horse carriage parked in the middle of the road. Approaching with a hand tucked behind his back, he was about to inquire when he heard the collective shout of alarm as Li Xiong threw all of the guards off in a single motion, flinging them to the ground.

“What strength!” Fei Sheng marveled, watching Ji Gang’s expression.

As a practitioner of Ji-Style Boxing, Ji Gang valued strength above all. Sure enough, his eyes lit up. “Where’s this boy from?”

Fei Sheng had already guessed upon seeing the escort of jailers. He hurried over, gripping the Xiuchun saber at his waist, but released it almost immediately. Instead, he kicked the chain on the ground up into his hand and called, “Out of the way. I’ll show you boys how it’s done!”

Shen Zechuan was inside waiting for Kong Ling and the others when he heard the commotion out in the courtyard. Lifting the bamboo blinds, he couldn’t help his astonishment when he saw Ji Gang. “Shifu, what’s wrong?”

Ji Gang handed his birdcage to Qiao Tianya and gestured for him to hang it under the eaves, then bent over to scoop a handful of water from the

copper basin to wash his hands. “Found a boy outside. Take a look; is he the one you want?”

As he spoke, Fei Sheng came in, pulling on an iron chain as if hauling in a bull. At the end was a sturdy boy. Still angry, the boy grabbed the chain and yanked Fei Sheng back toward him. Fei Sheng might have been an assistant commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, but his clothes were already drenched in sweat from dragging the boy the short distance from the gate.

“Oh!” Ding Tao poked his head out from the room and yelled, “That’s him! Li Xiong!”

“What’s going on?” Shen Zechuan asked.

Before Fei Sheng could answer, the chain went taut, and his entire body jerked backward.

Li Xiong pulled at the chain, struggling so hard cracks appeared on his wooden shackles as he dragged Fei Sheng around the courtyard. Fei Sheng’s back scraped across the beds of flowers, and mud splattered over his neck. He’d hoped to put on a display of his prowess but discovered he couldn’t get his feet under him.

Qiao Tianya tensed, but before he could move, Ji Gang threw out an arm to stop him and bellowed, “Tao-zi!”

Ding Tao stuffed his little book into his robe and vaulted over the veranda railing. Fei Sheng was still dragging on the ground; Ding Tao sprinted a few steps to catch up to them. Knowing he couldn’t stop Li Xiong, he stepped down on the chain instead and yelled, “Li Xiong—”

He slipped, catching his foot in the chain. The moment Li Xiong tugged, it threw Ding Tao backward. Quick-witted, Ding Tao threw up his arms to protect his head and shielded his cheeks with his elbows as he tumbled into the soft soil. Flower stems stabbed into his forearm as he rolled, only blocked by the dog-hide armguard he had just secured on himself.

Fei Sheng hooked his foot around the edge of a large rock to anchor himself, but he could feel the sharp pain from the chain tightening around

his arm. Gritting his teeth, he sprang to his feet and pulled until his entire body was leaning backward, legs planted in a low crouch for balance. Veins bulged on his arms, and he couldn't help cussing, "This damned bear strength!"

Ding Tao flipped back to his feet and, taking a running start, leapt into the air. Kicking against the railing to propel himself forward, he pounced on Li Xiong's back. He grabbed Li Xiong's back collar with one hand, clamped his legs around Li Xiong's neck, and raised a fist—but he didn't strike him, instead shouting, "Let go!"

The impact of Ding Tao landing on his shoulders threw Li Xiong off balance. Flexing his knees to stabilize himself, he dropped the chain and reached back with one hand to dislodge Ding Tao but was encumbered by the shackles. Enraged, he whipped his upper body around in an attempt to fling Ding Tao off. Ding Tao clung like a monkey, but the book in his robe slipped out.

Ding Tao's greatest skill was in qinggong, which had been imparted to him by his old man himself. Members of his family worked as guards in Libei, and they always brought a notebook along on the job to record every incident, regardless of significance. This book was more important to them than their own lives. In order to hold onto his book on the battlefield, Ding Tao's old man became a master of qinggong, perfecting a life-saving technique specifically developed for escape. It was a pity his father had eventually had his throat slit while chasing after his own little book.

Flustered at the loss of his notebook, Ding Tao reached out to catch it. Li Xiong grabbed his outstretched arm and flung the smaller boy over his shoulder, throwing him onto the ground like a fish he had pulled from a stream.

Ding Tao slammed down with a *thud*, in so much pain he couldn't make a sound. Even so, he swiftly caught hold of the book with his feet as Li Xiong clutched his collar and lifted him off the ground. Too preoccupied to worry about injury, Ding Tao tossed the book up and caught it with one hand before he was slammed to the ground again.

This time, Li Xiong knocked the wind out of him. Ding Tao choked, feeling bile rise in his throat. He kicked out his legs and locked them around Li Xiong's shoulders, using the momentum to pull himself up and fling Li Xiong to the ground. Li Xiong's shackles broke from the impact. He rolled to his feet, his eyes bulging as he charged at Ding Tao with a fist raised high.

Yet his fist suddenly encountered an immense resistance, as if he had struck a steel plate. He was unable to discharge even an ounce of his astonishing strength. Ji Gang, holding Li Xiong's fist in one hand, commanded, "Back!"

Li Xiong's legs didn't seem to obey him as he was pushed several steps back by this white-haired old man. Unable to maintain his newly regained balance, he fell back on his rear end.

Ji Gang shook out his sleeves and pulled Ding Tao up from the ground.

Ding Tao stuffed the book back under his robes. "Grandpa Ji! He hurt me so bad!"

"I told you a long time ago—you're going to get yourself in trouble if you rely on trickery and evasive tactics!" Ji Gang dusted off Ding Tao's back. "When you jumped on him earlier, you should've used Right-in-the-Bull's-eye on him. Why did you hesitate?"

Ding Tao wiped sweat off his face, aggrieved. "He ate the sweets I gave him! And we were still calling each other brothers yesterday."

Qiao Tianya folded his arms over his chest, leaning against the pillar, and whistled at Fei Sheng. "That's how it's done, is it, Lao-Fei?"

Fei Sheng stripped off his filthy outer robe and gave him a smile full of teeth. "Son of a bitch, why don't *you* try? This kid's strength is out of this world."

Shen Zechuan was surprised himself. Xiao Chiye was the strongest person he knew; he could draw the hundred-catty Conqueror Bow without help, relying on his own arm strength alone. Xiao Chiye could hoist him

absently over one shoulder while mounting a horse or fording a river. But even Xiao Chiye had not been this frightening at Li Xiong's age.

Ji Gang pulled Ding Tao behind him, took a few steps forward, and asked Li Xiong, "Which one of your parents is from Biansha?"

Li Xiong's butt was still sore from his fall. His shackles had fallen away, but the fetters on his feet were still there. He had been reluctant to come inside in the first place. Then Fei Sheng's treatment had sparked his rage, and Ji Gang had beaten him back. Now, seeing Ding Tao slinking back under the eaves with no shortage of people to console him, his mouth wobbled and he threw his head back in a wail, kicking his legs as he cried, "Why are you all bullying me?!"

Shen Zechuan let his hands relax and said to Ji Gang, "He's still a child."

Ji Gang observed Li Xiong's back and shoulders. "He was fighting haphazardly earlier, relying on brute force. It looked more like wrestling than anything. Lad, tell me honestly, is one of your parents from Biansha?"

Li Xiong ignored Ji Gang. Nothing anyone said registered through his despairing cries. He had been following at Lei Jingzhe's heels since he was a child, and without him, Li Xiong was like a toddler abandoned on the streets—lost and helpless, with no one to lean on.

His wailing was giving Shen Zechuan a headache. He hadn't slept well the night before, and found long periods of standing tiring. "Give him some more of your sweets," he told Ding Tao.

Ding Tao pouted. He felt around his sleeve pocket for some time before finally digging out an oilpaper packet. "They're melted."

Qiao Tianya picked up a branch of blossoms that had fallen to the ground and held it between his teeth as he grinned at Li Xiong. He stepped over the railing and squatted down before him, waving his hands placatingly. "Gege will remove these fetters and get someone to bring you some food. Do you want rice or noodles?"

Li Xiong hiccupped, his chin glistening with snot as he sniffled. "I want meat."

The bamboo blinds were partially lifted, letting in a breeze that cooled the room. Li Xiong sat cross-legged before the small table, eating with his hands and chewing his meat with great relish. Ding Tao silently counted the plates, feeling he might get full just from looking.

“His mother is most likely a woman the Biansha Horsemen abducted. It’s always been chaos along the banks of the Chashi River, and such things were common occurrences before the fall of Zhongbo. The Duanzhou Garrison Troops were reluctant to cross the border to give chase.” Ji Gang studied Li Xiong with a sidelong look. “But with an extraordinary physique like this, his father must be no ordinary person. I wonder how he fell into the bandits’ hands?”

“If he really has Biansha blood, it’s not strange that he would be abandoned.” Shen Zechuan recalled Li Xiong’s earlier display of strength. “Qudu keeps annual records of all those reported abducted at the frontiers, and the highest numbers are always reported in Duanzhou. If those abducted women fall pregnant and the Biansha tribes are unwilling to raise the child, the women will be thrown back across the Chashi River. At that point, their birth families don’t want to take them back either.”

Fei Sheng had returned after changing into clean robes. Seeing that Qiao Tianya remained silent, he said, “Him falling into the bandits’ hands by chance is the best-case scenario. The fear is that the bandits raised him all this time for a specific purpose.”

“Unlikely.” Ji Gang shook his head slightly. “You’ve never seen the Biansha people. They’re just like us; not everyone can grow that big and tall. Look at the Libei Armored Cavalry. Aside from the household registration requirement, they also require their recruits to have the physique of a soldier, but still, not everyone is as strong as the Prince of Libei. I doubt this lad’s father is any common tribesman; if he’s anything like his son, he’ll hold some titled position within the Biansha Horsemen by dint of his strength alone. I can’t think of anyone that fits the description among the Biansha generals I know near Zhongbo.”

“Okay, kid,” said Qiao Tianya between sips of chilled soup, “you’ve had your meat. Time for you to talk.”

Li Xiong was still chewing, his mouth too occupied to reply. His gaze swept over the group gathered around him before finally coming to rest on Shen Zechuan, and he mumbled something around his meat.

Ding Tao leaned in and listened carefully, then turned to Shen Zechuan. “Gongzi, he’s asking why you’re wearing an earring.” He turned back to Li Xiong. “Gongzi is wearing it because he wants to, what are you asking this for… Oh, you’ve seen the same one before… Not the same? So is it the same or not… Uh-huh… Well, Gongzi’s jade earring wasn’t bought with money… What do you mean you’ve seen it before?”

Li Xiong swallowed. Without bothering to wipe his mouth, he looked at Shen Zechuan and said, “I’ve seen your face before—at Gedal on the Chashi River!”

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Chapter 127:
Vulture

JI GANG jolted to his feet. “Nonsense!”

Although Ji Gang had subdued Li Xiong, the boy was not afraid of him. “It isn’t,” he said resolutely. “I’ve seen him before. There’s a portrait of him in Gedal. Dage used to live there—I remember it!”

To Fei Sheng, this did not augur well. He was keenly aware that he was not yet Shen Zechuan’s trusted subordinate; there were some matters he was not at liberty to hear. He got to his feet. “Looks like he’s almost done. Master, I’ll tell the kitchen they don’t need to cook any more meat.”

Once Fei Sheng withdrew, Shen Zechuan asked Ji Gang to sit before turning to Li Xiong. “Think carefully. Are you sure the portrait was of me?”

Li Xiong pinched the handkerchief he used to wipe his mouth in two fingers and scrutinized Shen Zechuan for a moment. “It kind of looked like you,” he answered hesitantly, “but also kind of not…”

Shen Zechuan felt something click in his mind. He pushed his spoon around his soup and lowered his eyes. “The portrait you saw was of a woman, yes?”

“Ah, right!” It finally dawned on Li Xiong. “That portrait was of a woman; you’re a man.”

In one moment, Shen Zechuan made several conjectures. He watched the sour plums swimming through the chilled soup under his spoon and thought back to what Zhou Gui had said not long ago. He thought of his mother, Bai Cha, and the bandit Lei Jingzhe, who had just returned to Dunzhou.

Without batting an eye, Shen Zechuan asked, “What kind of place is Gedal?”

“Gedal lies on the east bank of the Chashi River,” Tantai Hu said, scanning the horizon. “It’s part of Biansha’s territory. In the early days, it was a temporary refuge for bandits to hide from the Zhongbo garrison troops. Later, when the bandits started trafficking women from decent families, my elder brother, Tantai Long, led the joint garrison troops of two prefectures to wipe the settlement out. The remaining bandits defected to the Biansha Horsemen, specifically the Liaoying tribe, who used to roam there back then.” Tantai Hu looked up and watched Meng pierce the layers of clouds. “That’s where Lei Jingzhe comes from. After leaving the Zhu family, he had nowhere to go. He thought he might join the Zhongbo bandits and make his fortune, so he went to Gedal. But for whatever reason, he failed to establish himself there and eventually returned to Duanzhou, where he met Lei Changming and started to make his mark.”

Chen Yang squatted on the ground and kneaded a handful of dry soil. “It’s because after Tantai Long wiped out the Gedal bandits, the Liaoying tribe moved north. The bandits who had defected followed them up. The Liaoying tribe now acts as the reserve cavalry of the Hanma tribe. All the saker falcons of the Biansha people are trained and kept by the Liaoying tribe. At first, their status among the Twelve Tribes of Biansha was quite low—they were regarded as nothing more than servants who looked after the falcons—but twenty years ago, an ‘esuhuri’ appeared among the Liaoying tribe.”

Tantai Hu was not from Libei, and did not know the implication of this title. From beside them, Gu Jin explained, “It means *hero*.”

Chen Yang looked back and smiled at Tantai Hu. “You know how Biansha is made up of many different tribes? Only tribes where esuhuri have appeared can count as one of the main twelve. Coincidentally, our Prince of Libei and this esuhuri were both born the same year. His Lordship established the Libei Armored Cavalry at Luoxia Pass, while this hero conquered the three tribes of Liaoying, Goushe, and Changjiu in the desert and defeated the old chief of the Hanma tribe in the north with the use of saker falcons. From then on, he became the one and only Great Esuhuri to command these four tribes since the reign of Yongyi, and Libei’s archenemy.”

Tantai Hu gave a start. “Don’t tell me it’s…”

Behind them, Xiao Chiye turned his face to the sky and emptied the waterskin into his mouth. As he secured the lid, he confirmed: “Amur.”

They made way for him, and Xiao Chiye stepped forward onto the upturned earth to gaze at the Hongyan Mountains in the distance.

“Amur is currently the man most likely to become the Great King of Biansha. He has the ambition to subdue the Twelve Tribes.” His tall nose cast a shadow across his face when he turned to look at them. “He created the strongest cavalry in Biansha and has encroached farther into Great Zhou’s territory than anyone in history. Lao-Hu, the Biansha Horsemen you see today have actually been reformed by Amur. He combined the strengths of the Goushe tribe’s horses with the Liaoying tribe’s saker falcons. By switching to Goushe tribe’s ponies, he decreased the height of Hanma tribe’s mounts as he increased their speed, forming an army that would allow him to fight Libei in the air as well as on the ground.”

“He decreased their height?” Tantai Hu looked at Snowcrest. “Master, are the battle steeds in Libei different from those of Hanma tribe?”

“Of course they’re different.” Xiao Chiye chuckled, but his smile was faint. “At first, in order to keep up with the Hanma tribe’s speed, my father set up new stables at Luoxia Pass instead of bringing battle steeds over from Suotian Pass. That’s when they started breeding the current battle steeds of the Libei Armored Cavalry. They were all originally wild horses from the foot of the Hongyan Mountains, strong and muscular—the same breed the Hanma tribe once used. But Amur realized the drawbacks of this line before anyone else. He thought even though they were the same breed, the Libei Armored Cavalry’s horses could bear more weight. But if the Libei Armored Cavalry shed their armor, the Hanma tribe’s speed would no longer be an advantage. So he abandoned the Hanma tribe’s stables in the Hongyan Mountains and swapped his battle steeds for ponies from the Goushe tribe.”

Snowcrest shook its mane and paced a few steps around Xiao Chiye as it munched on grass.

“Those ponies have made us suffer quite a bit.” Chen Yang held his hand out flat, indicating the height of the animals for Tantai Hu. “The Goushe tribe’s horses caught the Libei Armored Cavalry off guard.”

Tantai Hu still didn’t understand. He had served in the garrison in Dengzhou and then in the Imperial Army, but neither of them relied on cavalry as their main forces. He couldn’t see what was so formidable about some ponies.

“They’re astonishingly fast.” Xiao Chiye’s eyes grew flinty as he recalled the fleeting glimpse he’d caught of them many years before. “Those horses were fierce and strong. Although they’re on the smaller side, they have great endurance. The Goushe tribe has been fighting battles with the Bianjun Commandery for years. Outsiders don’t understand; they think Lu Guangbai doesn’t live up to his name and isn’t worthy of being ranked as one of the Four Great Generals in the land. But if you put them in his position, they would know after a single skirmish that his infantrymen haven’t been hassling any ordinary cavalry on those night raids—this is the fastest cavalry in the world. Qidong has guarded the south for decades, with troops many times the size of the Goushe tribe’s, yet they’ve never managed to weaken them, simply because they can’t catch up. This is also the reason Qudu keeps a tight leash on Lu Guangbai’s troops. When the Goushe tribe appeared in the grasslands of Libei, they nearly crushed the newly formed Libei Armored Cavalry. After the Hanma tribe changed to these faster horses, the heavy armor my father introduced put the slower Libei Armored Cavalry at the mercy of their scimitars. To solve this problem, my father chose to pile on more weight, turning the Libei Armored Cavalry into a moving iron wall.”

Facing into the strong wind stirring the grassland, Xiao Chiye lost himself in thought. “Lao-Hu, the reason the Biansha Horsemen were able to fight their way through Zhongbo six years ago had everything to do with Amur’s change of battle steeds. If they had continued to use the wild horses from the foot of the Hongyan Mountains, they wouldn’t have had the stamina to get as far as they did. These newer horses are fast, but they’re also tough; they don’t slow at all when crossing the desert. Paired with the

saker falcons acting as reconnaissance, they were a catastrophe waiting to befall the Zhongbo garrison troops."

This was something that had kept Xiao Chiye tossing and turning at night after the fall of Zhongbo. When he had fought alongside Xiao Jiming as a youth in Libei, the Hanma tribe's tactics had been deeply impressed upon him. He had pondered more than once what he might have done in his father's position, faced with such strong enemies, other than increase his cavalry's weight. He had looked forward to seeing his elder brother's strategy: Xiao Jiming's answer had been to thin down the Libei Armored Cavalry's armor and enhance their mobility. Yet still Xiao Chiye was not satisfied.

He had the greed of a wolf. He valued the speed of his brother's troops, but he couldn't stand to give up the Libei Armored Cavalry's unique advantage.

This was not a problem he could solve with imagination alone. That was why, before entering Qudu all those years ago, Xiao Chiye had chosen to first accompany the army south, to witness the aftermath of the slaughter in Zhongbo with his own eyes. It was on that journey that he had first seen Lu Guangbai's infantry in action.

"I can't catch up with them. They're too fast." Six years ago, Lu Guangbai had squatted on the ground and drawn a map for Xiao Chiye. "But the Bianjun Commandery is still pretty good. Our beacon towers stretch on for hundreds of miles and transmit news quickly. At night, we're like a pocket: As long as we manage to cinch that narrow opening closed, our enemies can't enter and exit as they please. When any of their company falls behind, no matter how fast those ponies are, the Biansha horsemen will end up headless chickens."

Zuo Qianqiu had once instructed him thus: "A-Ye, any attack is an opportunity to defend, and any defense is a means to attack. Tianfei Watchtower stood firm all those years not because of my skill as a commanding general, but because the heavens bestowed upon Tianfei Watchtower a strong geographical advantage.

“Tianfei Watchtower must take a defensive stance—once our troops leave the walls, we can’t stand up to the Biansha Horsemen’s assaults. I was a general who cowered behind city gates. The only army that can pit themselves offensively against the Twelve Tribes of Biansha is the Libei Armored Cavalry. I told your father endless times never to let the Libei Armored Cavalry lose its edge and become a mere shield. Should that day come, our Great Zhou will have lost its spear completely.

“If you become a general one day, remember the balance of opportunities and strategies. On the battlefield, things can change in the blink of an eye. The moment you allow your opponent to control the rhythm of battle, you will lose all your advantages. You must learn to be patient, but you must seize your opportunities firmly when they come. Sometimes, landing a perfunctory, painless blow will only exhaust you and your forces. You must strike where it hurts.”

But it seemed nearly impossible.

Xiao Chiye had yet to think up a solution better than what his father and brother had come up with. He couldn’t engage in guerrilla tactics in Libei the way Lu Guangbai did in Bianjun. Still, he never forgot Zuo Qianqiu’s warning. He agreed wholeheartedly that the Libei Armored Cavalry couldn’t be reduced to a mere shield—they had to also be a spear. They hadn’t come this far, undergoing countless refinements, simply to bask in bygone glory. In Xiao Chiye’s eyes, it was easy to beat back the Biansha Horsemen time and time again, but a much bigger challenge to beat back Amur.

The Biansha Horsemen had grown stronger and stronger under Amur’s command. This man had the final say over the four tribes he ruled; he didn’t have to worry about watching his back. He was a vulture born in the desert, eyeing the Zhou empire like a piece of meat as he unrelentingly attempted to invade it. When Xiao Fangxu made changes to the Libei Armored Cavalry, Amur responded by changing the Hanma tribe. When Xiao Jiming made changes to the Libei Armored Cavalry again, Amur again changed the Hanma tribe. He had an uncanny understanding of the wolves. There was a certain intimacy in this: He understood the Libei Armored Cavalry better than most of those from Libei themselves.

The Hongyan Mountains blocked Xiao Chiye's gaze, just as his father and eldest brother had always stood between Xiao Chiye and their enemies. Xiao Chiye had not yet gone head-to-head with Amur, but he understood that this was the opponent he must defeat at all costs.

Amur was a wise vulture, well-versed in the ways of the world, while Xiao Chiye was still an exiled wolf pup embarking on his journey home.

Meng swooped down, bringing with him a gust of wind that whipped across the guards' faces. He landed on Xiao Chiye's shoulder, the fresh blood on his sharp talons leaving rough red streaks behind. He had exceeded the size everyone expected of him as a fledgling, and now the only one able to hold him up was Xiao Chiye—and Shen Zechuan, with whom Meng was particularly gentle.

Xiao Chiye collected his runaway thoughts and waved Chen Yang off when he moved to fetch the leather feed bag. He turned to look at Meng and commented, "He has already hunted his fill."

Meng was acting strangely today. He stared up at the sky with a sharp, penetrating gaze, never once shifting his eyes even when Xiao Chiye stroked his feathers. Xiao Chiye followed his gaze out into the distance.

All was quiet between earth and sky. The sharp wind springing out of the grass was like the strike of a long serpent. Before the snake could open its bloody maw, Meng took to the air again and tore through the wind to snatch up a saker falcon attempting to extricate itself from the grass. Meng rose rapidly into the air as the other bird flapped and struggled in his talons. By the time he brought the saker falcon before Xiao Chiye, the lone aerial scout had become a bloody mess of mangled flesh.

Xiao Chiye swung up astride his horse. Reins firmly in hand, he surveyed his surroundings, his gaze finally landing on the eastern horizon. He frowned. He had just entered Libei's territory—he hadn't even reached the Libei relay station. How could a saker falcon of the Biansha tribes appear here?

"Drums." Gu Jin raised his head and turned to face the wind. "Master, it's coming from the east!"

“That’s Border Camp—they mostly run patrols. They have a road that leads right to the Northeast Provisions Trail.” Chen Yang swiftly mounted as well. As he lifted his riding crop, he turned back in horror. “To the east of Border Camp is Third Sand Camp, where His Lordship the prince rotates his frontline troops. Border Camp keeps reserve battle steeds ready to be sent to the battlefields up north—”

Had the Biansha Horsemen encroached so far west? Then what about Third Sand Camp?

And what of the Prince of Libei?

Xiao Chiye gripped the reins and spurred his horse into a gallop.

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Chapter 128:
Enemy Attack

BORDER CAMP was an important supply site near the border of Libei. To maintain the physical strength of the frontline forces, Xiao Jiming set up the three Sand Camps—First, Second, and Third—in succession on the southeastern side of Libei, which acted as defensive barriers for Border Camp. Border Camp was stocked year-round with military provisions and equipment ready for supply to the front lines. There were stables there as well, with battle steeds on standby to replace those who fell in battle.

Dawn had yet to break when Wu Ziyu awoke. He squatted at the entrance of his tent and gestured for his personal guard to pour water over his head. “The fighting at the front line is too intense. We start running the moment we open our eyes and barely lie down before we close them again. It’s been half a month since I last bathed.”

The guard handed him a handkerchief, which he used to wipe his face. “Let’s make sure we eat well for the next two days. We’ll have to head north on the third to replace Guo Weili’s men. The Biansha baldies already took Tudalung Banner. This war has come to our doorstep.”

Wu Ziyu was the youngest of the current generals in Libei. He had initially been a guard in the prince’s manor, but after a particular incident in which he’d gone drinking and stirred up trouble, Xiao Jiming had dismissed him from his post and booted him into the military. He wasn’t a great warrior, but he was resourceful when it came to transporting supplies and allocating provisions. When Libei had lacked grain in early spring, he had swindled some from the bandits in Zhongbo, resolving the most pressing emergency for the battlefields.

When Chen Yang had escorted the grain from Huaizhou to Libei, Wu Ziyu was the one who received him. The young general had been working under Xiao Fangxu for the last two months, running this way and that until his legs were about to fall off. The soldiers under his command were

exhausted, but now, finally, it seemed it was Border Camp's turn to take a break.

The guard took Wu Ziyu's dirty handkerchief and washed it in the basin. "I thought it'd be a breeze to drive off the Hanma tribe with His Lordship the prince here. Who would've known it would only become harder the more we fought? Our front line has already been pushed back almost all the way to First Sand Camp. If this continues, Border Camp itself will have to be moved back."

Bare-chested, Wu Ziyu wiped his neck with the damp handkerchief and looked eastward. "If Border Camp retreats, the heir's defensive layout in the southeast will all be laid to waste. This place is the bedrock that enables the three camps to our east to keep up the fight. We can't afford to lose it."

The guard picked up the basin and dumped out the water. "We can't play the long game either. Besides the soldiers, there are also military craftsmen in these camps who need to eat. If the second young master had remained in Qudu as the Marquis of Dingdu instead of rebelling, we might have gone on like this for a while longer. But now that he offed the emperor, Juexi won't supply us with provisions, and the reserve supplies stored along the Northeast Provisions Trail won't last us for long."

Wu Ziyu covered his face with the kerchief and squinted up at the sky through the dripping water, listening to the guard griping without responding.

The guard set the basin aside. "General, how about steamed buns and milk tea for breakfast? The milk is good stuff—they just brought it from back home. It can't be stored long; we have to drink it as soon as possible. I'll tell the cook to pour some strong tea over the clotted cream. You—"

Wu Ziyu raised a finger, signaling for quiet. He listened to the hubbub of splashing water and footsteps all around and looked up at the sky, but did not hear the whistle of today's falcon patrol. He was quiet a moment longer, then asked, "Have last night's patrolmen returned?"

The guard was rinsing his feet with water. At this, he too looked up at the sky. "It's too early. It'll be well into the morning by the time they circle

back from Third Sand Camp.”

“Why don’t I hear the whistles from the falcon patrol?”

“Didn’t let them out.” The guard hesitated. “We were too tired when we got back to camp last night, so they didn’t report to you immediately. The falcons all came back wounded; they were brutally clawed by the Biansha Horsemen’s saker falcons in battle, and several died—even Hou fell. Everyone who raises falcons treasures their babies; since we’re back here, they called off the falcon patrols for today and had the medic tend to their injuries.”

Falcons were not easy to keep. Taming them was a significant exercise in patience, and the ones that could act as scouts were the cream of the crop. Although they were not gyrfalcons, they were just as valuable. The recent battles Xiao Fangxu had fought at the front line were not going smoothly for the soldiers nor for the birds. In Libei, the horses and falcons were close compatriots, and their bonds with the armored cavalry were deep. The men grew upset when either were injured.

Wu Ziyu pulled the kerchief off his face and brought his fingers to his mouth to whistle. A falcon swooped down from the top of the tent. As Wu Ziyu was bare-chested, the bird did not land on him, instead hopping onto the drying pole where their clothes hung. “Release Chi here,” he said. “We’re in the middle of a war. Forgoing the sky patrol is the same as losing an eye. Even in Border Camp, we can’t be careless.”

“But General, Chi has been patrolling the battlefield for half a month…”

“What choice do we have?” Wu Ziyu had a gruff voice, yet when he looked up at his falcon, he was gentle as he urged, “Go.”

Chi spread its wings and sprang into the sky. It circled Border Camp a few times, then soared into the sunrise. Wu Ziyu ducked back into the tent. “The battle steeds we brought back from the front lines should be switched out, too. We need to bring the reserve horses north in three days. The Hanma tribe breached Guo Weili’s defenses at Tudalung Banner. Many of our brothers were killed, and quite a number of horses were lost in the

swamp. He’s sent three military reports to hurry us along—he’s in urgent need of new horses.”

The barefooted guard slipped on his shoes and fell into step behind him. “I’ve already had some men prepare the horses, but this group is the last. Any new battle steeds from back home won’t arrive until autumn.”

“I’ll talk to him about it.” Wu Ziyu dressed briskly.

Guo Weili had been personally promoted by Xiao Jiming. He was good on the field, but the heir was the one who knew how to use him best. When Guo Weili let the rush of battle go to his head, Xiao Jiming was like an iron chain that could rein him back, preventing their main forces from suffering heavy losses. Because of this, Xiao Jiming was also the one Guo Weili was most willing to listen to. Now that the commander in chief was Xiao Fangxu, Guo Weili’s style was less effective. With no one to rein him in, there were plenty of situations where he had ended up twisting in the wind.

Wu Ziyu had returned from the front lines with a batch of equipment that needed repair. The Libei Armored Cavalry went through a tremendous amount of equipment and relied heavily on their supplies and gear. They retained over ten thousand military craftsmen, split up between the various camps. After every battle, these craftsmen were responsible for repairing equipment for the armored cavalry, working day and night.

His own armor was badly worn. As the morning wore on, Wu Ziyu stopped by the craftsmen’s tent to check on the progress of the repair; on the way, he asked the guard about his falcon several times, but there was no news of Chi’s return. By noon, the sparks flying out of the furnaces made it so hot inside the tent that it was hard to breathe.

The weather was stifling, the kind of heat that made one long to lie down. Even the wind was hot. Wu Ziyu sweated profusely as he looked down at the ground in thought. Several of the craftsmen were already suffering from heatstroke. Wu Ziyu instructed his men to cool themselves down with splashes of cold water, but it was like trying to douse a burning cart of firewood with a cup of water—entirely futile.

Wu Ziyu sat for a moment and covered his face with a wet handkerchief. “Get the mess cooks to whip up some mung bean soup to cool these men. Have them make as much as they can. The equipment repair can’t be delayed. Our brothers on the front lines are riding into battle in worn-out armor.”

The guard nodded in acknowledgment. He’d foregone his armor altogether in the heat, and his collar was wide open. He was about to turn when he felt a few drops of water falling on his face and wondered aloud, “Is it raining?”

Wu Ziyu’s nape was wet, too, but the drops felt sticky. He looked up and saw Chi’s silhouette block out the blazing sun before suddenly diving downward. Halfway to the ground, two saker falcons swooped out from midair and grasped hold of Chi before soaring aloft once more. Chi opened its beak in a shrill cry as the two birds tore at it, its feathers scattering in the air.

Wu Ziyu surged to his feet. Someone atop the watchtower in the distance was already shouting, “*Enemy attack—!*”

The drums sounded, each beat pounding through Wu Ziyu’s chest. He gave his commands without hesitation: “Armor on! This is an attack from the Liaoying tribe, not Hanma cavalry—don’t panic!”

The tent flaps lifted in unison as the Libei Armored Cavalry carried out his orders without a hitch. They dressed and donned their armor with swift and orderly movements, gradually turning from individuals into men of iron and steel encased within the oppressive weight of the heavy armor.

“Squadron Six, guard the stables. Squadron Three, granary. If the vanguard I’m leading falls in battle, Border Camp is bound to fall. If you see that the situation is critical, don’t wait. Open the stables and lead the craftsmen down the bridleway toward the Northeast Provisions Trail; don’t stop until you reach the Liuyang Camps under Zhao Hui’s command.” Even as Wu Ziyu spoke, he saw that Chi had fallen to the ground. That shocking mass of crimson made him pause; he quickly turned aside and hauled his guard up from the ground. “If Border Camp falls, the horses and the craftsmen can retreat, but the grain can’t. If you have to, burn it all. Don’t

leave even a single grain of rice to the Liaoying tribe! Head back home and report to the heir."

Military wisdom dictated that, in an unfavorable situation like this, the general should retreat with the troops and leave the rearguard behind to stall for time. But Wu Ziyu knew this sneak attack would be a force to be reckoned with. If the Biansha Horsemen had bypassed Third Sand Camp's defenses, there were two possibilities: The first was that they had skirted around Third Sand Camp and crept their way over in silence. The second was that Xiao Fangxu, Zuo Qianqiu, and the rest had all perished in battle. In that case, the front line had collapsed, and Third Sand Camp had been wiped out before they could even send a signal.

Regardless of which it was, they could not afford to underestimate this attack. Wu Ziyu didn't dare leave anyone else the responsibility of stalling for time; he had to guard this place himself.

Wu Ziyu stormed through the squadron with his helmet in his hands. "Which direction—"

He was still speaking when a boulder as large as his torso came plummeting out of the sky, smashing into the newly erected watchtower with a thunderous crash. Even before the sound of the watchtower's collapse reached them, it had knocked a group of tents flat.

"Catapults!" The guard behind him shouted at the top of his voice: "General, they're coming around from the south!"

"They're working with those fucking bandits!" Wu Ziyu spat. "On your horses! They're encumbered by heavy equipment, so they snuck up quietly. Without the Goushe tribe ponies, they can't get away!"

No sooner had he spoken than frantic neighing rang out from the stables. As the panicked battle steeds raced through the camp, he could see flashes of scimitars and flames among the chaos. It seemed their enemies had the same idea as Wu Ziyu—slaughter all the horses they couldn't grab and burn all the grain they couldn't carry. Leave nothing to send to the battlefields up north. Wu Ziyu could try to replace the provisions, but without those battle steeds, the Base Camp headed by Guo Weili would lose their combat ability.

“Motherfucker.” Wu Ziyu tightened his grip on his blade. “Tell Squadron Six to leave with the horses, *now*!”

His guard swung up onto his horse. The tents near the stables were all aflame. As he charged over with his men, his saddle sank from under him. The guard felt a sick sense of foreboding the instant before the horse reared up. A Biansha soldier was under it, clinging to the girth of the saddle like a spider. Whipping a dagger out from the side of his leg, his assailant stabbed at the horse’s belly.

The dagger collided with the horse’s armor, leaving a pale mark on the metal, but did not pierce through.

The steed’s front hooves landed back on the ground, and Wu Ziyu’s guard tumbled off, drawing his blade and ramming into the Biansha soldier. The Libei Armored Cavalry’s armor was too heavy for him to withstand; the impact forced the Biansha soldier back, his feet leaving furrows in the ground. Yet the guard’s armor was not as tough as the horses’. He hacked off the Biansha soldier’s head, but in getting close enough to strike, was also wounded by the man’s scimitar.

These Biansha soldiers were like locusts. They swarmed the trapped beast that was the Libei Armored Cavalry and fought to the death. The helmet Wu Ziyu had been about to put on had been struck from his hands. He was surrounded by enemy fighters. The fire had quickly spread from the stables to the paddock where the other horses waited; their blood-soaked cries pierced Wu Ziyu’s ears.

He was not a general skilled in combat, and his soldiers were likewise the Libei Armored Cavalry’s reserve troops—they were a supply squadron first and foremost. They had only returned from the battlefield a few days ago, and their exhausted bodies couldn’t withstand such a relentless assault. What was more, Wu Ziyu had been forced to divert some of their manpower to protect the craftsmen, who were just as important as the battle steeds.

The guard climbed atop his horse once again and charged forward to knock down the blazing railings of the paddock. The battle steeds bolted.

“Put the craftsmen on the horses. Take off your armor; you need to ride as fast as possible to the bridleway—”

The breath was knocked out of Wu Ziyu as two men charged him from behind and flung him to the ground. As he tumbled, the back of his bare head struck the packed dirt. In the next moment, a rope was around his neck, and the two men began to drag him off.

Wu Ziyu tugged at the rope tightening around his neck. His voice came out as a hoarse squeak as he choked out the rest of his instructions. “When… When you reach the camp…tell Zhao Hui to head north…”

Beads of sweat dripped into his eyes, which stung so painfully he could barely keep them open. Amid the churning smoke and dust, he struggled for breath as he watched the sky turn yellow. The saker falcons that had torn Chi apart were hovering above him.

“Fuck.” Grief overwhelmed Wu Ziyu. His vision blurred, his eyes burning with sweat and tears. He cursed over and over, “Fuck!”

Dragged to the edge of the sea of fire amid the chaotic sounds of hoofbeats, Wu Ziyu collided with a boulder on the ground and desperately grabbed hold of a burning rail. The pain of the flames was excruciating; his grip faltered.

Suddenly, the saker falcons banked and flew apart; a falcon cry pierced clear through to the clouds. Meng dropped down on the back of a saker falcon in midair and engaged in a fierce battle. At the same time, the sound of galloping horses closed in from afar. Wu Ziyu couldn’t see through the smoke in his eyes; he caught only a vague glimpse of a tall figure riding steadily toward him on horseback.

Surprised, he shouted, “The prince! Your Lordship!”

Wu Ziyu felt a tight grip around his ankle. He heard Chen Yang bellow, “Drag him out!”

Feeling the rope constricting around his throat, Wu Ziyu croaked, “Drag me—my ass! I—I’ve still got a rope around my neck!”

Chen Yang let go and swiped his blade against the side of Wu Ziyu’s neck, scaring him so much his hair stood on end. Within seconds, he was

tugged out of the fire, the rope still dangling down his chest. He rolled on the ground as they swatted at him to extinguish the flames. Gasping for air, he raised his eyes, squinting against the sunlight, and saw the rider dismount. The man brought his fingers to his lips and let out a long whistle.

Meng shook the saker falcon from side to side as he swooped closer. The saker falcon shrieked in pain, its feathers raining down. Meng's sharp talons dug like blades into the bird's flesh. Breaking through the smoke, Meng landed in front of Xiao Chiye and flicked his talons to toss the saker falcon to the ground.

"Nope, not my old man." Meng perched on Xiao Chiye's arm as they both looked back at Wu Ziyu. "It's your second young master."

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Chapter 129:
Graveyard of Dreams

WU ZIYU'S GUARD was riding out of the camp when he saw the men from the Imperial Army charging in the opposite direction like ravenous beasts. This company was more excited than afraid. They had been restricted over and over back in Qudu and Zhongbo; to date, they had never fought a battle where they could truly let loose. When they had clashed with the Eight Great Battalions under Han Jin, their opponent had collapsed under the first press like soft dough. Now that they had finally come face to face with the Biansha horsemen, the Imperial Army thrummed with frenzied energy as they drew their blades and charged into the fray.

The Liaoying tribe had arrived with limited numbers, relying on the catapults to take Border Camp by surprise. Victory had been within their grasp when they were caught off-guard by these troops that appeared out of thin air.

The Imperial Army had always been stationed in Qudu; when they fought, it was in the streets and alleyways of the city. While their blades were not as long as those of the Libei Armored Cavalry, they wielded them artfully. They had been an incomplete army before Xiao Chiye took over as supreme commander, and in Qudu their main forces had long been nicknamed the "moochers with military designations," for they were best at mucking about and loafing on the job. All told, they were a slippery group, not an organized wall like the Libei Armored Cavalry. As long as they could skewer the enemies with their blades, they were not above striking below the belt.

Now the Biansha soldiers had become the target of their surprise attack. Wu Ziyu's guard turned back to cut off the Liaoying tribe's retreat. The Biansha men at the periphery quickly withdrew with their catapults, but their soldiers who were still inside Border Camp were trapped—they had no choice but to fight to the death with the Imperial Army.

By the time Wu Ziyu was able to stand, the fire had died down. Blade in hand, Chen Yang checked the corpses and reported to Xiao Chiye, “Master, these men are indeed from the Liaoying tribe.”

“The catapults are heavy equipment; they’re difficult to move. If they want to take those with them when they flee, they won’t be able to build up much speed.” Xiao Chiye turned to Tantai Hu. “Lao-Hu, take the cavalry and give chase.”

Wu Ziyu was quick to speak up. “My horse can still run. Take mine, brother.”

Tantai Hu thanked him and swung up onto the horse. Gu Jin turned his own mount around. “Follow me, Lao-Hu. We’ll go after them together.”

By the time they set off on their pursuit, half of Border Camp had been razed by the fire. Xiao Chiye surveyed the horse stables and granary, while Wu Ziyu followed close behind and called out, “Er-gongzi…”

“Although the main duty of Border Camp is patrols, it’s also where reserve supplies are stored. This place is a good distance from the border. There’s Third Sand Camp to the east acting as a shield, with sentry posts and checkpoints along the way.” Xiao Chiye squinted against the glare of the sun. He looked at Wu Ziyu again. “You let them get behind you—where are your patrols?”

Wu Ziyu recognized Xiao Chiye. In his early years, when he had been selected alongside Zhao Hui and Chen Yang to join Xiao Jiming’s personal guards in the prince’s residence, he had seen the second young master as a boy. But that child and the Xiao Chiye standing before him now were like two different people. His excessively tall stature meant he was always looking down on one from above, and being regarded this way made Wu Ziyu feel suddenly small.

He averted his gaze. “The patrol squadron that went out last night didn’t return.”

“The patrol that went out last night didn’t return, yet as the commanding general, you didn’t sense anything amiss even at noon.” Xiao Chiye looked as if he was just engaging in idle chatter. He had an oppressive presence, but his attitude was mild. “First Sand Camp is where

the fighting is, while Border Camp supplies Third Sand Camp and the rest. Even a slight disturbance here will affect the battle at the front lines. You certainly seem laid back."

Wu Ziyu knew exactly what he was implying. Xiao Chiye had never held a post in Libei's military. His only military rank at the moment was that of the Imperial Army's supreme commander—one no longer acknowledged by Qudu. He was in no position to reprimand Wu Ziyu. Yet the more placid his tone, the more Wu Ziyu grew hot with shame.

News of the second young master's return had been circulating in Libei for over two months. Even the common soldiers knew, and each of the high-ranking officers had their own thoughts about it. Of the officers currently serving in the Libei Armored Cavalry, other than the few veterans left over from Xiao Fangxu's era, all the rest had been promoted by Xiao Jiming himself.

But now Xiao Jiming was wounded, and no one knew when he would return to his command. Would the second young master take Xiao Jiming's place upon his return? Rumors swirled through the camps, but whether these officers were ready to throw in their lot with Xiao Chiye or were determined to discount him, all were waiting for Xiao Chiye to return and show his mettle. While six years was not a long time, nor was it a short one. There were all kinds of strange tales about the second young master.

Wu Ziyu was observing him as well. "Our men here returned from First Sand Camp only yesterday. Our main task is planning and coordinating the transportation of equipment and provisions for the battlefield." Wu Ziyu paused for a moment. "The original garrison troops stationed at Border Camp have been rotated over to First Sand Camp, so none of our regular forces are stationed here for the time being. We're situated behind Third Sand Camp. I really didn't expect…"

He gradually trailed off. The disquieting atmosphere was getting to him; he felt that silent pressure more viscerally than the blazing sun. He shot a glance at Xiao Chiye. His throat throbbed, but he didn't dare continue speaking.

Meng cocked his head and stared at Wu Ziyu. His beak like an iron hook had yet to be wiped clean.

The nape of Xiao Chiye's neck was exposed to the scorching sun. He lifted his free hand to cover it and raised his head slightly. He was still looking at the horse stables. "But aren't you the Libei Armored Cavalry?"

Wu Ziyu stood there in silence.

Xiao Chiye's left arm was steady; the combined weight of Meng and the armguard was nothing to him. But he didn't let Meng rest for long. Once Chen Yang finished a headcount of the bodies, Xiao Chiye released Meng into the air once again.

Chen Yang looked up, following Meng's flight. "Master, should we get a squadron to follow?"

"Considering the Biansha soldiers brought catapults for a sneak attack, it should have been tough for them to avoid Third Sand Camp's patrol. If they made it all the way here undetected, Third Sand Camp has already fallen." Xiao Chiye wasn't smiling now. "My father allowed the supply squadron to retreat to Border Camp, so it's likely he still doesn't know Third Sand Camp is in enemy hands. I'll send Meng over to First Sand Camp to deliver the news. We'll rest for the night and head for Third Sand Camp in the morning."

"Er-gongzi, you have no cavalry or supplies," Wu Ziyu blurted. "If you continue east, you'll come face-to-face with the Biansha soldiers. Seeing as they were able to take down Third Sand Camp without so much as a peep, the men there are probably from the Hanma tribe, adept in powerful offense. It's safer to wait for reinforcements from Zhao Hui's Liuyang Camps. I'll send someone to deliver the message to the heir right away. He'll definitely send Zhao Hui over."

"If you had somehow sent the message to the Liuyang Camps yesterday right after you arrived, there might still be a chance of reinforcements reaching us before sunset tomorrow. If you send the message now, it'll take a day and a night to reach the Northeast Provisions Trail even at top speed. Zhao Hui will need another day and night to get to the Liuyang Camps from home. By the time he arrives, Border Camp will

be gone.” Xiao Chiye pointed to the ruins of the watchtower. “Rebuild the watchtower. Don’t set it up to watch the east; shift it to the southeast corner. Do a count of the grain and battle steeds, and have the craftsmen prioritize repairs of the camp’s defensive walls that were hit by the catapults.”

“If you’re worried about the Biansha soldiers returning, you should move the grain and horses to the Northeast Provisions Trail now,” Wu Ziyu said, catching up with Xiao Chiye. “There’s simply no time to rebuild Border Camp. Third Sand Camp is only a few miles away from this place. Riders from the Hanma tribe will be here within a day.”

Xiao Chiye climbed up the railing and stepped down on the other side. He turned and held a hand up, motioning for Wu Ziyu not to follow him, and asked lightly, “Do you mean that?”

Wu Ziyu didn’t understand what Xiao Chiye was getting at. He continued, rapid-fire: “The only thing to do now is abandon Border Camp and try to preserve what supplies we can—”

Xiao Chiye casually backed away from him. “Mm-hmm. And you don’t feel even the tiniest urge to go after them?” By now, the sun had begun its downward tilt. Wu Ziyu stood on one side of the ruined railing, baffled by Xiao Chiye’s gaze on him. The burns on his back stung in the scorching sunlight. Frowning, he watched as Xiao Chiye turned away. He couldn’t help shouting with all his might, “We can’t fight them, Er-gongzi! I told you, we’re just the supply squadron!”

Without turning, Xiao Chiye waved a hand at Wu Ziyu. His meaning was clear—Wu Ziyu could shut up now. Xiao Chiye stood before the collapsed granary looking out at the horizon, his expression cold and detached, and his lips tightly compressed. He didn’t move for a long time.

In his tent, Xiao Fangxu sprawled confidently in his seat and threw his head back to swallow the last mouthful of milk tea. The salted milk tea, brewed with coarse leaves, had gone cold after being set aside. The clotted cream coated his mouth, the milky aroma lingering in his nose. His shoulders were bare, allowing the medic to apply medicine.

“Amur is a worthy opponent.” Xiao Fangxu shifted his bandaged shoulder. “I’ve been observing the Hanma tribe for more than ten years, but even I didn’t expect their offensive power to be so strong. When people grow old, their reactions slow. I’m no longer the soldier I once was.”

“Libei’s advantages are conspicuous, and its disadvantages are likewise clear to see.” Zuo Qianqiu grabbed a handful of sand and watched the grains trickle through his fingers. “Amur changed his attack strategy to face you. He never launched such a sudden assault when he fought Jiming in the past. Jiming’s skills lie in strategy. The camps he set up along the boundary line are all interlocked. When our cavalry rides out to face the enemy, they wear invisible chains held by Xiao Jiming himself. When the situation changes, Jiming can pull that chain and haul those forces back in a heartbeat to avoid heavy losses. Now that Jiming has retreated and you’re back in command, news is being passed much more slowly. And your style is so different from Jiming’s—the vanguard is afraid to go all out when they charge, and the reserve troops’ previous rhythm is also disrupted. How could Amur let this opportunity pass him by?”

Xiao Fangxu rose to get dressed. Scars covered the powerful muscles on his back. He called himself old, but his intimidating physique was sturdier now than it’d been in his youth. He slipped into his robe and began to fasten his armor, every step meticulous.

“If Great Zhou were still at its peak, Jiming would be the best commander for the Libei Armored Cavalry. He has performed extraordinarily well, and is the best candidate to carry Libei forward.” Xiao Fangxu strapped on his blade and continued stoically, “But Great Zhou is showing signs of collapse. Remaining the wall of the empire is no longer a suitable strategy for the Libei Armored Cavalry. Amur is the Great Esuhuri, the hero the heavens bestowed upon Biansha. He travels through the various tribes, hoping to create a new world under his rule. Jiming’s conservative strategy is giving our enemy time to grow. Qianqiu, there’s something you and I both need to recognize: Biansha is no longer a group of scattered little tribes relying on looting and plundering to survive. They are streams that have converged under Amur’s leadership to become a boundless sea. Has it occurred to you that by the time Amur unifies all

twelve tribes, Biansha will be a behemoth capable of devouring Great Zhou? If we're to strike, it must be now.

"I am the spear of Libei, and Jiming is its shield. When the Libei Armored Cavalry shed part of its weight, it also fell into the trap of complacency. An armored cavalry that has lost its thirst for victory is akin to a wolf that no longer feasts on meat. Sooner or later, it will be conquered and replaced."

Expressionless, Xiao Fangxu continued, "Jiming's defeat is not a bad thing for him or for the Cavalry. I threw him into the military when he was just a teenager, but not because I hoped he'd maintain some so-called unfailing glory. There are no legends on the battlefield—I, too, will fail. The current Libei Armored Cavalry needs to understand sooner rather than later that what we're after is not eternal triumph, but simply to win. Even if we lose, we will climb swiftly back to our feet. As long as we have limbs left, we can still fight. Both Jiming and I have accomplished what we needed to. Now, it's time for Libei to feel *hunger*."

Xiao Fangxu paused; his gaze was deep. "The Libei Armored Cavalry is in urgent need of a new commander. This person must be unlike the rest of us—our polar opposite, even. He must tear off the layer of scholarly elegance that Jiming has established. He must be avaricious and savage. He has to make the Libei Armored Cavalry ravenous; he must be the wolf that leads the hunt."

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Chapter 130:
Jade Earring

WHILE BORDER CAMP was under attack, Shen Zechuan was taking a nap.

Qiao Tianya sat under the eaves plucking at his qin, while Ding Tao and Li Xiong stood around the large copper basin and played with the fish. All was quiet inside the room, where sunlight spilled over half of Shen Zechuan's shoulders. He had just settled the details of registration for the Yellow Register with Zhou Gui and the others the night before, and in the morning, they had begun an inventory of Cizhou's reserve grain. Autumn was around the corner. If they wanted to do business with Chazhou, now was the best time. He had worked until the afternoon, when he took the opportunity to doze off for a moment at his desk.

Some time later, he woke up.

Shen Zechuan leaned back against the chair and pinched the spot between his brows. After taking a moment to gather himself, he called for Qiao Tianya.

"The bandits we released half a month ago have returned to Mount Luo by now. Has there been any news of Lei Jingzhe?" Shen Zechuan took up his brush and continued writing where he had left off.

"Even if he makes a move, the news would take days to reach us." Qiao Tianya picked a chair and took a seat. "The marquis was thorough in his arrangements. When Lei Jingzhe returns to Mount Luo, there'll be a target painted on his back. Just resolving his own affairs will take him a month at least."

Shen Zechuan said nothing and continued writing. Finding him somewhat distracted, Qiao Tianya added, "Master only slept four hours last night, and after dinner tonight, you still have more discussions to attend at the Zhou manor. There's no harm in resting now while you can."

“I’ll sleep after I come back,” Shen Zechuan replied. “Is Fei Sheng still idling around? Give him something to do, since that’s what he wants.”

Qiao Tianya rubbed his fingers together. “I’ve been thinking about this recently as well. You’ve left him out in the cold for more than a month. If this goes on, he may begin to resent you.”

“He’s sharp. He knows Ce’an doesn’t want him, so he wishes to remain in Cizhou. Zhou Gui and Kong Ling are uneasy about his background in the Embroidered Uniform Guard and dare not use him, so his only hope is to follow Shifu around, hoping to get a job from me that way.” Shen Zechuan set down the brush and waited for the ink to dry. “Now that Gu Jin has returned to Libei, we are indeed short on scouts.”

When Qiao Tianya and the others had arrived in Cizhou, the men from the Embroidered Uniform Guard who had followed them out of Qudu also arrived one after another. Yet even together, there were only a hundred or so men, half of whom were Fei Sheng’s old subordinates. Shen Zechuan had set Fei Sheng aside because it was clear Fei Sheng didn’t wish to work under him—his sights were set squarely on Xiao Chiye. Unfortunately, Xiao Chiye wouldn’t have him, so Fei Sheng had settled for the next best option and remained beside Ji Gang, obeying his every command. Fei Sheng was not involved in any of Shen Zechuan’s ongoing affairs in Cizhou, yet he often placed himself in Shen Zechuan’s line of sight. His intentions were patently obvious.

Fei Sheng had a discerning eye. He had observed Shen Zechuan’s every move and knew he lacked manpower; even if Shen Zechuan left him out in the cold for a while, he would eventually have put him to use.

Qiao Tianya leaned forward across the table. “What do you want him to investigate?”

“Two things,” Shen Zechuan answered. “First, I want him to keep an ongoing record of the price of tea and rice in the various prefectures of Zhongbo, and in Huaizhou up north. We’ll want Cizhou’s asking price to fall somewhere in between. If we’re to avoid taking a loss, we have to be intimately acquainted with the prices in these places. The Embroidered Uniform Guard had the same task back in Qudu; he can assign the right

men to carry out this task. Second, I want him to get to the bottom of Lei Changming and Lei Jingzhe's relationship with the Yan Clan of Hezhou—especially Lei Changming. I want to know everything."

Qiao Tianya's brows rose slightly. "Lei Changming was merely a human shield Lei Jingzhe set up for himself to hide behind. Why investigate him instead of Lei Jingzhe?"

Shen Zechuan paused. "As I was drifting off earlier, I recalled the way Lei Changming looked before he died. There was something strange about him. The custom of wearing earrings is prevalent among the noble clans in Qudu and the eight surrounding cities. Li Xiong is an orphan Lei Jingzhe raised. The boy rarely socializes with people from the prominent clans; he'd only seen it once. It's no surprise my earring left an impression on *him*. But as the bandit chief of Mount Luo, Lei Changming interacted with prefects and garrison troop commanders in Dunzhou and Duanzhou, and had dealings with Yan Heru, the youngest son of the prestigious merchant clan of Hezhou. He should have come across men wearing earrings countless times. Yet, before he died, he was fixated on my jade earring."

A small crease appeared between Shen Zechuan's brows. He could vividly recall Lei Changming's expression in his final moments. Had Li Xiong not mentioned the earring, Shen Zechuan wouldn't have thought any more on it. But through that jade earring, Lei Changming's deranged and delirious eyes had clearly been seeing someone else. Under most circumstances, this would've been a trivial detail, to be dismissed without a second thought. Shen Zechuan's jade earring was nothing exceptional, just a scrap of stone Xiao Chiye had polished himself while on the run. Compared to the box of earrings he gifted Shen Zechuan back in Qudu, this stone was neither rare nor valuable; all the noble clans considered it good luck to have their precious children wear earrings of jade pearls. Only their roundness and smoothness gave away the profound sentiment of the giver.

But this memory pricked at the back of Shen Zechuan's mind. He intuitively felt there was something here that he ought to investigate further—that there were still some secrets regarding this uncle-and-nephew pair to which Zhou Gui and Kong Ling were not privy.

Li Xiong sat by the copper basin outside, playing cat's cradle with a length of red string. But his hands were clumsy, and the string tangled in his fingers. Beside him, Ding Tao was trying to catch the fish, splashing water on Li Xiong in the process. All of a sudden, Li Xiong snapped the string in anger, threw the pieces at Ding Tao, and scowled. "I'm going to look for my dage."

Ding Tao, his sleeves still rolled up, coaxed him. "Come on, what's so good about your dage? Why not take Qiao Yueyue and me as your older brothers and serve our young master? Our young master gives out sweets every month and he never withholds our salaries."

"I don't want money." Li Xiong surged to his feet. "I want my dage."

Ding Tao glanced toward the main room. Through the half-raised bamboo blinds, he could see that Qiao Tianya was still speaking to Shen Zechuan; he rolled down his wet sleeves and suggested, "Come with me; I'll take you to get some meat."

"I'm not eating!" Li Xiong snapped, suddenly agitated. He scratched his cheek and demanded, "Why won't you people let me go? I wanna leave the city. I wanna go back to Mount Luo!"

As far as Ding Tao was concerned, Li Xiong was a brat who couldn't be reasoned with, but he was also a brat Ding Tao couldn't beat in a fight. Seeing that Li Xiong was about to throw another tantrum, Ding Tao got an idea. "You miss your dage so much. He must really be strong, huh?"

"My dage is the number-one hero of Mount Luo. Of course he's strong."

Ding Tao clapped his hands together. "So what if he's a hero on Mount Luo? Is he as strong as my master and my young master? *I* don't think of him as a hero!"

Sure enough, Li Xiong grew furious. He glared at Ding Tao. "Your master and young master aren't strong at all! That one in there is so skinny; my dage could kill him with one punch!"

Ding Tao spat inwardly, his pride pricked, but still tried his best to put on a cheerful act. “Oh? Then that’s pretty strong. Your dage is Lei Jingzhe, right? His uncle is Lei Changming. I know all about it.”

Already somewhat envious of Ding Tao, Li Xiong was certainly not willing to lose out to him here. Eager to prove that Lei Jingzhe was the most formidable, he rushed to say, “Lei Changming is strong too—he can lift the little ones upside down by the ankle—but my dage is even stronger than Lei Changming!”

Seeing that he had taken the bait, Ding Tao played along. “Oh? What kind of martial arts move is lifting the little ones upside down?”

Li Xiong had blurted it without thinking, but now that Ding Tao was asking, he strained to recall everything he knew about Lei Changming. Memories flashed through his mind. “The little ones are children—he lifted them and held them upside down. Lei Changming loved to do things like that.” He suddenly recalled something more and added, “Oh! I remember now! The earring…round white earrings. The kid Lei Changming lifted upside down wore one too!”

Shen Zechuan had planned to head out after his meal. As he changed his outer robe, he could hear Ding Tao and Li Xiong running around the courtyard, yelling and screaming. The maidservant bowed her way out and was about to instruct them not to make a din when Shen Zechuan said, “It’s fine. Let them play.”

Qiao Tianya was setting his qin on a table on the veranda when he saw the chaos. Fearing the little rascals would crash into it while they were playing, he took it back to his own room.

When it was time to go, Ding Tao followed Shen Zechuan out of the courtyard, looking as if he wished to speak. But perhaps seeing it was already late, the boy clung to the moon gate, swallowed back his words, and said simply, “If it gets dark, I’ll go wait for you with a lantern.”

Shen Zechuan beckoned Ding Tao over. “After your meal later, you two head over to Grandpa Ji’s courtyard. He wants to teach both of you the Twenty-Four Stances of the Ji Clan. I’ll be back before midnight.”

Ding Tao nodded and saw Shen Zechuan to the gates, feeling a little loath to part with him. He had heard a host of stories in the afternoon, but he didn't know how many of them were real and how many made up by Li Xiong. Night was falling, and he was beginning to be afraid. As soon as Shen Zechuan left, he brought Li Xiong over to look for Ji Gang. Many of the guards and the men of the Embroidered Uniform Guard also lived in this courtyard. Surely he had nothing to fear with so many others around.

When Shen Zechuan arrived at the Zhou manor, the study was brightly lit, and several of Zhou Gui's advisors were already seated within. The lingering heat of the day warmed the summer evening, and the windows on all three sides of the study were thrown open. Still, with all the incense lit to repel mosquitoes, the room felt stuffy when crowded. Kong Ling, concerned Shen Zechuan would be uncomfortable, told the servants to keep the study door open as well, to give the excess smoke another place to go.

"This has the records of all the grain we counted today. Vice Commander, please look it over." Zhou Gui presented the book to Shen Zechuan and said from his seat, "The autumn harvest is right around the corner. The way we see it, this is the most appropriate time to discuss business with Chazhou."

Kong Ling explained, "In past years, the traveling merchants from Hezhou and Juexi passed through Zhongbo in the autumn to do business at the trade market between Libei and the Huiyan tribe. But the war is intense this year; the merchants will most likely head for Chazhou instead to make up for this gap in their business." Kong Ling lifted the hem of his robe and sat down. "If we arrive after them, then no matter how cheap we sell the grain, Chazhou won't have the money to buy. We should act as soon as possible."

"You're right." Shen Zechuan cast a thoughtful eye over the accounts. "This is our most pressing task at the moment. If it goes smoothly, Cizhou will have a much easier time next year. This is Cizhou's first time proposing such a trade agreement, so the merchants from Juexi and Hezhou wouldn't anticipate it. But when our men arrive in Chazhou,

the merchants will no doubt hear whispers. I don't imagine they'll be happy about us cutting in on their livelihood."

"That's the hard part," Zhou Gui agreed. "Leaving aside the question of whether the negotiations with Chazhou's prefect and the bandits go smoothly, we'll have to wrack our brains to guard against any others who may want to take advantage of us. Our Cizhou Garrison Troops have been established for less than a month. The military drill grounds are unfinished, and the soldiers are yet untrained. If others with designs on the grain attempt to take it by force, we'll be no match for them."

Shen Zechuan had been waiting days for Zhou Gui to say just these words. He shut the book and tapped lightly on it with his finger. "Cizhou lacks a commanding general. Neither you nor I are experts at training soldiers. The Imperial Army left some men and horses behind to watch over the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds. If Your Excellency is willing, why not let them train the garrison troops? We have to come to an agreement with Chazhou before we transport any grain. Have you decided who will negotiate on Cizhou's behalf? I'll have Qiao Tianya and the Embroidered Uniform Guard escort him for protection."

Zhou Gui glanced at Kong Ling. "I can't leave Cizhou, so I'll send Chengfeng, along with some clerks who are good with numbers. If the vice commander is willing to assign some men for protection, that would be for the best."

Zhou Gui might not understand the undercurrents beneath Shen Zechuan's words, but Kong Ling took his meaning perfectly well. He composed himself and said, "I must admit, I'm a greenhorn when it comes to such negotiations, and apprehensive lest I come up against any particularly formidable businessmen. I'd like to ask if the vice commander has any ingenious stratagem he might share with me for the journey?"

Shen Zechuan smiled. "You're much too modest, Mister Chengfeng. What ingenious stratagem could I have? But if it's all right, I'd like to accompany you on this trip."

How would Zhou Gui dare send Shen Zechuan off into the tiger's den? Xiao Chiye's *I'll be sure to arrive within a day* still echoed in his ears!

He hastened to interject, “The vice commander is—”

But Kong Ling was already bowing and expressing his gratitude. “I would feel considerably more reassured having the vice commander with me.”

This man certainly knows how it’s done. Shen Zechuan smiled amiably at Kong Ling. *Truly too clever.*

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Chapter 131:
A Spider's Web

IT WAS ALREADY the end of the sixth month, so they scheduled their departure for the start of the seventh. After Shen Zechuan left, the other advisors withdrew for the night as well.

As soon as they were alone, Zhou Gui turned to Kong Ling. "Why did you insist on letting the vice commander come with you? It's chaos in Chazhou. If anything happens to the vice commander, what will we tell the marquis? I was thinking you could disguise yourselves as merchants along the way. We still have some rapport with Luo Mu, the prefect of Chazhou."

Kong Ling nodded as he drained the last of his cold tea. He swallowed and replied, "We can still disguise ourselves as merchants if the vice commander comes along, and the Embroidered Uniform Guard will be with us too. It's much safer than our initial plan."

Zhou Gui pointed a finger at Kong Ling. "What a moment of foolishness from a clever man. With the vice commander's…appearance, how can he disguise himself as a merchant? Any sharp-eyed person along the way will see something's off at a glance."

Kong Ling looked at Zhou Gui for a moment, the tea leaves still in his mouth. He felt that Zhou Gui really didn't understand. "Who's the foolish one? Let me ask you—from the rebuilding of Cizhou's garrison troops to the planning of our business dealings in Chazhou, which of them hasn't been a proposal from the vice commander? Cizhou has truly reaped the benefits from him, but there's no such thing as a free lunch."

"You think I don't see this? I do!" Zhou Gui retorted. "We can't afford to pay him and the marquis back for the favor of their help at the moment; that's why we're supplying the Imperial Army with grain and giving them the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds. Doesn't this make us even, more or less? The vice commander is going to great trouble to aid Cizhou, but Cizhou is also doing its best to repay the vice commander for his kindness."

Kong Ling had chewed on the tea leaves until they were bitter; now he swallowed. “We can’t repay it now, and it will only become harder to repay it in the future. The marquis beat back the bandits from Mount Luo, giving Cizhou the crucial time it needs to rebuild, yet we can’t even afford to supply half a year’s worth of grain to the twenty thousand soldiers of the Imperial Army. We’ve given them the Beiyuan Hunting Ground, yes, but you should know that it will be the Imperial Army’s camp and drill ground from now on. It doesn’t matter how we try to draw the line; in the eyes of outsiders, Cizhou already belongs to the Imperial Army.

“What’s more, once our trade agreement with Chazhou is established, how will you split the profits with the vice commander? The vice commander said he’ll assign Qiao Tianya to escort me, but who is Qiao Tianya? He was a judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard back in Qudu—a much higher rank than yours. When we entered the capital in the past, he’s someone we’d have had to get out of our sedans and bow to, before moving aside so he could pass. The vice commander assigned him to escort me—how could a mere commoner like me accept such a favor? And when we reached Chazhou, who would be in charge then, Qiao Tianya, or me? Yet you agreed so readily! That’s why I say you mean well, but you’re too naive.”

Zhou Gui had never served as an official in the imperial court; his first official post had been in Zhongbo. He had his teacher to thank for recognizing his talents; Zhou Gui had served as a tax circuit intendant under him. He’d been good at his job, and was a well-read young man. His teacher valued his ability, and betrothed his own daughter to Zhou Gui. Thus had Zhou Gui been spared much of the nastiness so common in officials circles. He was later promoted to Cizhou’s prefect based on his qualifications and experience. Both his career and home life had been almost entirely smooth sailing before the fall of Zhongbo. Unlike men like Liang Cuishan, who had been trampled by officials from the noble clans in Qudu, Zhou Gui had never endured that kind of hardship. He truly did not understand that kind of circuitous and convoluted jockeying for power.

Stupefied at this sudden castigation, Zhou Gui said hesitantly, “It’s a dilemma for me too, you know. I have to consider your safety when you’re

away doing business in Chazhou. The garrison troops are recently established, and the Imperial Army has already left. The only ones who can be of any use to us at present are the Embroidered Uniform Guard members at the vice commander's side."

"When the vice commander first said he would remain in Cizhou, it was because we didn't yet trust the Imperial Army," said Kong Ling. "We had no such doubts by the time the marquis left, yet the vice commander still stayed behind. To Cizhou, he is 'the rain that bedews all things in silence'[3]—he has quietly infiltrated Cizhou with his generous favors. He probably had this all planned out before ever entering the city gates. It's too late for us to realize this now."

After interacting with both men over the last few weeks, Zhou Gui felt that although Xiao Chiye was not the friendliest to talk to, he handled things efficiently and showed others the respect they deserved. He was a man who laid his cards on the table. Shen Zechuan, however, was another story. Shen Zechuan sat in the seat of honor when they met to make plans for Cizhou, yet he treated all the advisors with utmost courtesy and even deferentially addressed Kong Ling as Mister Chengfeng. He was open to discussion, giving the impression that he was a humble, unassuming person who showed respect even to those below him. Over time, Zhou Gui's wariness of him had gradually bled away.

Zhou Gui got to his feet, hands still gripping his robe. For a long time, he was speechless. No matter how obtuse he might be, he understood now: Shen Zechuan had been going all-out to help them because he saw Cizhou as a prize within his grasp. Dazed, he said, "Well. If the vice commander…if he's willing to restore Cizhou to its former glory, then I wouldn't mind ceding the position of prefect to him."

Kong Ling looked out into the night. A gray moth, attracted by the light from the study, rushed toward the window, only to flutter right into the spider web concealed between the upturned eaves.

After a moment of silence, he said, "Zhou Gui, it's time to dispense with the title of prefect. With Hai Liangyi's death, the moderates in Qudu are under attack by the students. There is no longer anyone who can maintain peace in Great Zhou on his own. The empire is falling apart. If the

throne of Qudu is a deer, a prize for the taking, then Cizhou is merely a rabbit. Without this wolf and fox to guarantee our safety, Cizhou will be no more than prey in the eyes of the jackals in Qudu. You and I are powerless."

Zhou Gui and Kong Ling had been students together in their youth. They had many years of friendship between them, yet Zhou Gui had rarely seen him so solemn. "I appreciate your efforts and your considerations here. All I ask is that the vice commander lives up to our expectations and doesn't let us down. Such a person frightens me."

Kong Ling remembered the night he met with Lei Changming in the bandits' camp. Shen Zechuan had seamlessly transformed between one moment and the next, chatting and smiling amid a forest of blades. His tone had been genuine; even his eyes shone with sincerity. Not only had Lei Changming believed him—even Kong Ling himself had been taken in. It was after this incident that Kong Ling began to truly scrutinize this man, Shen Zechuan.

He dropped his gaze and said, troubled, "I stood out too much tonight; I may have already crossed the line. I fear the vice commander will remember this. As your advisor, I shouldn't have shown off before him. I must be more careful in the future."

As Zhou Gui and Kong Ling discussed him in the study, Shen Zechuan returned to his residence. Assuming Ji Gang had already gone to bed, Shen Zechuan didn't send anyone over to disturb him but returned to his own rooms. As he walked along the veranda, he passed Fei Sheng on night duty in the courtyard, keeping watch with his men.

Only after Shen Zechuan went inside did Fei Sheng relax a little. From where he stood under the tree, Qiao Tianya shared some of his dwindling supply of tobacco with Fei Sheng. When he saw the light in the main room go out after some time, Qiao Tianya instructed the guards to put out the lanterns in the courtyard as well.

"It's hard for Master to fall asleep without the marquis here," Qiao Tianya said in a hushed tone, "and his sleep is fitful. If you hear any noise inside later tonight, don't let anyone enter and disturb him."

It took only a moment for Fei Sheng to realize why. He lowered the pipe and puffed smoke into the night. “Understood. The Chashi Sinkhole was a nightmare. Thanks.”

Qiao Tianya did not light his pipe. He braced an arm on the tree trunk and listened to the croaks of the frogs in the pond. “You’ve been idle here a long time. Master finds it a pity for you to remain merely a guard. He has two assignments for you. I’ll get Shifu to hand you the authority token tomorrow morning.”

Fei Sheng understood perfectly that Shen Zechuan wanted to use him, but had no intention of keeping him too close; by no means would he be able to replace Qiao Tianya. He smoked in silence for a while, then knocked the pipe a few times and answered with a smile, “Sure. I’m looking forward to it. But give me a hint—what’s the assignment?”

Qiao Tianya looked toward Fei Sheng. “Record keeping. Easy-peasy.”

“And the other one?” Fei Sheng probed.

“Investigate the two bandits named Lei, especially Lei Changming—find out everything there is to know about him and report it straight to Master.” Qiao Tianya smiled. “This mission is a waste of your talent. Ding Tao would’ve been enough, but he’s too young. I fear he doesn’t have the experience, so it comes down to you. You’re an expert in this field. How about it?”

Fei Sheng smiled back and nodded. “As long as it’s on Master’s instructions, there’s nothing that can’t be done.”

After a pause, Qiao Tianya went on, “As for me, there’s something else I’d like to ask your help with.”

Fei Sheng twirled his pipe. “You and I are brothers; no need to be so courteous. What is it?”

Qiao Tianya pushed himself off the tree. “When you send your men out to keep track of the price of goods, there’s someone I’d like you to look for.”

This got Fei Sheng’s attention. He glanced at Qiao Tianya. “Who?”

“Yao Wenyu.”

It was the dead of night, but the Imperial Army had yet to rest.

Wu Ziyu was drinking milk tea with Chen Yang, squatting on the ground while the medic applied a poultice to his back. “What exactly does Er-gongzi intend to do?”

Chen Yang was sorting out the registers of military craftsmen in Border Camp. “That’s up to my master. Why are you asking me?”

“We’ve known each other a long time. Can’t you give me a little hint?”

After neatly compiling the registers, Chen Yang looked at Wu Ziyu, unruffled. “If it’s a personal chat you’re after, I’ll drink and dine with you. If you want to discuss military affairs, I’ll first have to address you as the battalion general. How am I supposed to answer when you mix personal affairs and official business?”

Wu Ziyu pulled on his shirt. “Well, I’ll level with you. Er-gongzi wants to recover the occupied Third Sand Camp to the east. I don’t think it’s a good idea. It can’t be done. The Libei Armored Cavalry in Border Camp right now is under my command. We are not frontline fighters; we’re a support squadron that transports supplies between battlefields. We may be able to dance with the Liaoying tribe for a while, but if we have to face the Hanma tribe… Sorry, but I’ll take my men and retreat right away.”

Chen Yang nodded. “Then forgive me for not seeing you out.”

Clicking his tongue, Wu Ziyu asked, impatient, “How is that your answer?”

Chen Yang set aside the register of names. “If you say those words to my master, he’ll answer you just as I did. If you want to leave, then sure. Go.”

“Listen, it’s not because I’m afraid to fight the Hanma tribe. But we can’t afford to fight a battle against them right now,” Wu Ziyu explained. “Why throw an egg against a rock? The battle steeds and military craftsmen from this camp are Libei’s most valuable resources. What good will it do us

to waste more time here with the Biansha Horsemen? If we send our people and supplies to the Northeast Provisions Trail now and ask for help, we'll have reinforcements from the Liuyang Camps. It won't be too late at that point to come back and reclaim Third Sand and Border Camp."

"It won't be too late?" Xiao Chiye lifted the hanging screen and ducked to enter the tent. He wiped his hands dry on a handkerchief as he said, "How did you come to this conclusion? Enlighten me."

The instant Xiao Chiye entered, Wu Ziyu felt the tent grow dimmer. The medic packed his case, bowed once to Xiao Chiye, and withdrew from the tent. Somewhat embarrassed, Wu Ziyu averted his gaze.

Xiao Chiye tossed the handkerchief to Chen Yang and sat by the stove, where a pot of milk tea was keeping warm. It had been a long time since Xiao Chiye had last tasted it. Gu Jin came forward from a corner of the tent and poured a bowl for Xiao Chiye.

Silence descended over the tent. Wu Ziyu felt a creeping unease. Even when he had made mistakes under Xiao Jiming's command, he hadn't experienced the same feeling of oppressiveness he did in Xiao Chiye's presence.

Xiao Chiye took a mouthful of tea and asked Wu Ziyu, "Any more fresh milk?"

Wu Ziyu shook his head hastily. "No, just this one pot. It was specially sent from back home for everyone in Border Camp to satisfy their cravings."

"How about coarse tea?"

"How could we not have something to perk ourselves up?" Wu Ziyu replied. "There's plenty of tea in the granary. If you like, I'll get someone to pack some for you."

Xiao Chiye leaned back, propping his elbows behind him, and looked at Wu Ziyu. "Even if you stand here all night trying to convince me, I'm still planning to leave before dawn tomorrow. You run at the first sign of an attack. Aren't you the Libei Armored Cavalry?"

This was the second time Wu Ziyu had heard Xiao Chiye say those words, and it made him fume. Yet just as he finally worked himself up to retort, Xiao Chiye continued, “Gu Jin, go pack some. Seal it in a case and send someone to deliver it to Cizhou tomorrow morning. While you’re at it, tell Lanzhou all is well.”

Wu Ziyu had no idea who this “Lanzhou” was. To him, it sounded like Xiao Chiye wasn’t taking the war seriously; instead, he was thinking of gifting tea. Unable to bear it, he blurted, “Er-gongzi—”

“While we’re talking about military affairs, I’m not your *Er-gongzi*; I’m the supreme commander of the Imperial Army, Xiao Ce’an. I asked you if you’re the Libei Armored Cavalry, and not once have you answered me with certainty. Libei doesn’t have a dedicated supply squadron. There is only the one Libei Armored Cavalry. Your soldiers ride the same battle steeds and are equipped with the same long sabers as the men on the front lines.” Xiao Chiye fixed his gaze on Wu Ziyu, finished the milk tea, and said with an edge of mockery, “So, is this all a commanding general of Libei has to offer?”

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Chapter 132:
Troops on the Move

WHEN WU ZIYU RETURNED from the battlefield to Border Camp, he had passed Third Sand Camp and visited Base Camp. However, in the eyes of the generals from these camps, he had never been considered a *commanding general*. In discussions of military affairs, his name came up only in relation to grain delivery. When the Hanma tribe had launched a sudden assault on Libei's trade market in the eighth year of Xiande, the quickest troops to respond were the supply squadrons led by Wu Ziyu. It was the only battle he had ever fought.

"Now that Border Camp's main forces have been dispatched to the front line up north, *you* are the commanding general of Border Camp. The Imperial Army will send scouts up to Third Sand Camp for reconnaissance. When they return, I hope to have the assistance of Border Camp."

Xiao Chiye set down his bowl and continued, "This surprise attack from the Liaoying tribe was obviously planned for some time. Cut off access to Third Sand Camp's bridleway and Border Camp will lose its eyes and ears, along with its protective barrier. If you retreat now, it's true that you can ensure the safety of the supplies—but the battlefield, with First Sand Camp marking its edge, will end up surrounded by the Biansha Horsemen on all sides. No matter how many men are in the Liuyang Camps, they'll have to split their forces. A team will have to bypass the Libei homeland in a long-distance march and head for the battlefield in the northeast to provide reinforcement. By then, it won't matter if there are supplies to spare. The frontline troops will have long been wiped out."

Xiao Jiming had chosen Border Camp as a supply site because of the roads that connected it with Third Sand Camp to the east and the Northeast Provisions Trail to the west. It could swiftly deliver supplies and deploy troops for rapid reinforcement. Once this place was gone, Xiao Fangxu, still on the front lines, would be cut off from both. There was no direct road from the Northeast Provisions Trail to First Sand Camp. Zhao Hui would have to take a detour, which would add four days to the journey at

minimum. In these four days, Xiao Fangxu, with neither supplies nor reinforcements, would be left to face the Hanma tribe to the east and the Liaoying tribe to the south. The Biansha Horsemen needed only send their soldiers to fight them in turns—they would quickly wear down Xiao Fangxu's elite forces, already exhausted from protracted battle.

Wu Ziyu's fury had been extinguished. He stood in silence for a moment before saying, "The Liuyang Camps under Zhao Hui's command are one of the Libei Armored Cavalry's most elite forces. The Liaoying tribe that surprised us here won't stop him. He can forgo the roundabout route and cut straight through here to the battlefield."

"As one of Libei's most elite forces, the troops in the Liuyang Camps are the ones who have exchanged the most blows with the Hanma tribe. Amur likely understands their capabilities as well as we do. If you know Zhao Hui can break through the Liaoying tribe's encirclement and rush to the battlefield from here, Amur must've considered the same thing. Today was a prime opportunity for him to wipe out this whole camp with a surprise attack, yet he sent only the Liaoying tribe. Can you guess what he's thinking?"

Wu Ziyu's expression gradually turned dark.

Of the famous thirty-six stratagems of war, there was one called "releasing one's adversaries in order to ensnare them." Wu Ziyu's squadron encountered a surprise attack today at Border Camp. Faced with this crisis, it was reasonable to assume he would send his guards rushing to the Northeast Provisions Trail with the most crucial supplies. By the time Zhao Hui received these supplies, it would be too late for the camp. Sending reinforcements to the front line via a roundabout route was both time-consuming and dangerous, so Zhao Hui would be forced to turn his attention to the occupied Border Camp and plan his attack based on the number of Liaoying tribe soldiers reported by Wu Ziyu's guards. Once he arrived at Border Camp, however, Amur would likely have withdrawn the Liaoying tribe and be lying in wait with Biansha's elite cavalry. Instead of the weaker forces he expected, Zhao Hui would be up against a total assault from Amur.

Whether he won or lost, Zhao Hui would be held up at Border Camp, leaving Xiao Fangxu stranded on the front line. Amur, it seemed, understood the Libei Armored Cavalry all too well.

“So Zhao Hui can’t come, but we can’t win either,” Wu Ziyu said. “The army is rapidly depleting their provisions on the front line. Either way, His Lordship will face an arduous battle in a few days’ time.” He walked over to a shelf, pulled down a map, and shook it out onto the ground. “Third Sand Camp is right next to Second Sand Camp. If Amur launches a surprise assault northward from there, he’ll be striking at His Lordship’s back.”

Tantai Hu, having just finished washing up, walked in barefoot, his robe hanging loosely off his shoulders. When he saw everyone gathered around the map, he squatted down to join them.

“What should we do?” Wu Ziyu lifted his eyes and looked at Xiao Chiye. “We lose if we advance, and we lose if we retreat. Amur has anticipated any move we might make.”

Tantai Hu touched the scar on his face. “That’s not true. He doesn’t know about the Imperial Army. He couldn’t have anticipated our troops’ arrival.” He pointed to Third Sand Camp on the map. “This place is close to Mount Luo in Zhongbo, where bandits abound. The Liaoying tribe evaded the Libei Armored Cavalry’s falcon patrol and brought heavy equipment like catapults south of Border Camp for a sneak attack—to achieve this, they must have had the help of the bandits. I don’t know much about these schemes and strategies, but there’s something the vice…Gongzi said that makes sense.”

Xiao Chiye’s eyebrows shot up. “What did Lanzhou say?”

“Smart people don’t do unnecessary things.” Tantai Hu’s expression turned grave. “Why would Amur go to all this trouble to catch Zhao Hui here? If his battles against His Lordship the prince have been going smoothly, why split his forces like this?”

Xiao Chiye bent over and looked at the map, twirling his thumb ring. “That’s right. A plan like this shows that Amur is also having a hard time on the battlefield. It’s already the seventh month. If the war goes through autumn without a decisive victory for either side, Amur will face the bitter

cold of winter. All of Biansha's grain reserves this year were directed to the battlefield. The longer the war drags on, the more unfavorable their position."

Wu Ziyu blinked, remembering something, but Xiao Chiye continued. "After my brother was injured, Amur changed the strategy he'd been using for the past few years. When I was in Cizhou, I heard the Biansha Horsemen had fought their way to Tudalung Banner. In the past, their cavalry would strike and run, yet now this was no longer the case. Not only did they not run, they held what ground they gained and advanced in full force. Amur has lost his patience in the desert. He's encroaching farther and farther into Libei, trying to occupy our grasslands and our camps. From this standpoint alone, Border Camp is vital. If we lose this place, Libei will have to take a great step back. Third Sand Camp will fall completely, and the rest of our defenses in the east will follow. If we can hold onto Border Camp, we can give my father some breathing room. And as long as he's on the battlefield, Amur won't be able to push past this line."

Xiao Chiye pointed out Border Camp's location to Wu Ziyu. "If you can hold on until the first snow of the year, you'll have dealt a heavy blow to Amur. No matter what, we cannot lose Border Camp. Draw a north-south boundary line extending from here. We can only move forward; we can never retreat again."

Wu Ziyu looked down at the map. "But if Amur plans to lock down Zhao Hui's Liuyang Camps from here, how can we stop him with the twenty-five thousand men we have at present?" he wondered. "Third Sand Camp is a key strategic point. If Amur has the Hanma tribe stationed there, our chance of launching a counterattack will go from slim to none."

Xiao Chiye drew his hand back from the map and thought a moment. "The Biansha Horsemen are used to the passive rhythm of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Amur feels confident placing such a bet because he's sure the troops in Border Camp won't dare head east and launch an assault of their own. The men they sent to attack Border Camp were caught off-guard by our response. Third Sand Camp is some distance away; after fleeing here, our enemies won't reach it until tomorrow morning. If we set

off before dawn, we'll arrive at Third Sand Camp just as they're resting from their march."

Still squatting, Wu Ziyu shifted his weight and stared silently at the map for a long while. By the time he reached a resolution, his legs had gone numb. "If you've made up your mind to go, Supreme Commander, the Imperial Army can use the remaining battle steeds in Border Camp."

"The Imperial Army is an infantry force. There's no need for battle steeds. Besides, the steeds of Libei are too heavy, and they make a commotion when they gallop. They aren't suitable for laying an ambush." Xiao Chiye swept his gaze over Tantai Hu, Chen Yang, and Gu Jin. Finally, he said to Wu Ziyu, "Let the Imperial Army greet Amur this time."

The Imperial Army set out before dawn the next day.

Despite his injury, Gu Jin had resumed his position as scout. Tantai Hu followed Xiao Chiye, leaving Chen Yang behind to hold Border Camp. Wu Ziyu was puzzled, but when he saw Chen Yang had no complaints, he didn't probe further.

At this hour, the morning dew was still heavy on the grasses. The Imperial Army hadn't been walking long before their armor was soaked. They didn't follow the bridleway, but took the same route the Liaoying tribe had taken when they retreated.

"This place isn't far from Zhongbo's borders. Master, why is there no relay station set up here?" Tantai Hu looked southward. "Once you cross this grassland, Mount Luo is only a day and a night's ride away."

"The defenses of the Libei Armored Cavalry were all set up with the Biansha Horsemen in mind." Xiao Chiye glanced south, his blade at his side. "The bandits didn't dare come this far north before. Times are different now."

"Anyone who throws their lot in with the Biansha baldies are fucking bastards," Tantai Hu spat hatefully as he plucked at the grass.

The Imperial Army traveled at a rapid march, but it was after noon when they arrived within sight of Third Sand Camp. It was a permanent

encampment, with watchtowers and protective walls.

Gu Jin lay prone in the grass and remained still for a long time. Tantai Hu followed suit and waited a moment, but he could see nothing of interest up ahead. “What do you see?”

Stretching out a hand, Gu Jin brushed the grass aside. “Wu Ziyu was right. There’s cavalry from the Hanma tribe in Third Sand Camp; the horse dung is fresh. They set up patrols around the camp with far more vigilance than what we had in Border Camp.” He rolled over and squinted up at the sky.

“No whistles and no saker falcons. The Liaoying tribe that surprised Border Camp yesterday was a feint.”

“This place is hard to attack,” Tantai Hu said. “The camp is surrounded by grassy fields. If we get any closer, we’ll have nowhere to hide.”

“Remember, this is Third Sand Camp.” Gu Jin felt around for the tobacco in his robe and stuffed it directly into his mouth to chew. “There are watchtowers on all four corners. Not only will we have nowhere to hide, there are also caltrops laid out on the outskirts of the camp, and spiked road barriers set up at the front and back to hinder cavalry.”

Tantai Hu looked back and said quietly to Xiao Chiye, “How about going through the ditches? They still have to eat, drink, piss, and shit.”

Xiao Chiye didn’t answer, but Gu Jin looked a little awkward. He lowered his head down into the grass, saying in an even softer voice, “There used to be ditches that led out of the camp. You’ve heard how Master once used this move to infiltrate the Biansha camp during a battle in the eastern mountain range? Well, our heir felt this was a hole in our own defenses and sealed off the camps’ ditches when he returned.”

Tantai Hu shut his mouth and lay flat to the earth.

The selection and layout of a campsite were of utmost importance for any troops during a war, and the latrine was the most important element of all. Filthy ditches like this had to be dug far from the army provisions and the tents where the soldiers slept. They had to either be very deep, or drain

away out of the camp. Third Sand Camp was a permanent fort; a ditch that led out was naturally the preferable option. But Xiao Chiye had previously dug his way into a Biansha encampment with only a handful of soldiers and set fire to the camp from within. This had left a deep impression on Xiao Jiming. To be safe, the heir ordered all the latrines in Libei's camps reconstructed as deep ditches with waste disposed of on a fixed schedule. No one could have known this change would become an obstacle for Xiao Chiye years later.

How were they to attack now?

Xiao Chiye alone was looking at the sky. "Don't worry. I have a plan."

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Chapter 133:
Nine Years

EVENING FELL, and the sun made its descent in the west.

Huhelu, the Biansha general who had launched the surprise attack on Third Sand Camp, was having his meal. Born in the Changjiu tribe, he was in the prime of his life at almost forty years old. After Amur took command of the four tribes, Huhelu became not only Amur's adopted son but also a capable general under his command. By a curious coincidence, he was also the one who had led the squadron Xiao Chiye infiltrated nine years ago in the eastern mountain range.

Though a narrow-minded man with a hot temper, Huhelu was also resourceful and knew when to advance and retreat. Guo Weili had lost battles to him more than once, and the two men were known to hurl insults and spit at one another on the battlefield. Amur had sent Huhelu to the southeast because his people already held Tudalung Banner, but also because Huhelu had an exceptional talent for fighting battles in the wilderness. He'd once kept Guo Weili surrounded in a swamp for a day and night, picking off Guo Weili's forces and sending the morale of Base Camp plunging.

"The Esuhuri wants me to treat the captured Libei military craftsmen well, but these people are more stubborn than mules. Feeding them is a waste of food." Huhelu stripped mutton flesh off the bone with the dagger in his hand and spoke to his deputy general in the Biansha tongue. "I'm thinking of just shipping all the equipment and food out of here and slaughtering the craftsmen. The Changjiu tribe still has some troops in the east that can watch over the supplies for the esuhuri for now."

"Before you left, the esuhuri specifically instructed you not to hurt the craftsmen." Bayim, the deputy general, was an older man with a dark complexion. Under Huhelu's command, he had never had the chance to be promoted despite his age. He faced Huhelu and tried to persuade him, "The

esuhuri holds these craftsmen in high regard. Why incur his wrath over this?”

Huhelu tossed the dagger onto the tray and grabbed a handkerchief to wipe his hands. He rose and looked out from the pinned-up tent flap. “But they’ve enraged me.” Huhelu bent slightly and peered at the military craftsmen bound in the clearing outside. “You understand the language of the Zhou empire too. They called me a butcher of the eastern mountain range. They said they want to fuck my mother!”

“They’ve been out in the sun for four days without food or water,” Bayim said. “Even the saker falcons of the Liaoying tribe must eat meat after so long if they wish to survive. In their strategies of war, it’s said that if you want your opponents to submit, you should make them feel not only fear, but gratitude as well. You’ve made them afraid. Give them water and food, then untie them and show them concern with a smile. They will be grateful to you, and grateful to the esuhuri.”

Huhelu stroked his stubbled jaw and did as his deputy advised.

Far from being grateful, his prisoners knocked over the water he sent them, and their curses continued uninterrupted well into the night. Unable to sleep soundly, Huhelu abandoned the Zhou empire’s way and used his own method: He had the mouthy military craftsmen hung up on the pole rack before the clearing and ordered his men to skin them like sheep.

Standing in the open space, Huhelu gestured at his belly and said in the language of the Zhou empire, “Xiao Fangxu’s going hungry on the battlefield. How can he fight a war on an empty stomach? Since you’re all so fat, I’ll have your flesh air-dried and sent to him. That way everyone will win.”

Huhelu had the rest of them whipped as punishment. Military craftsmen, who couldn’t even fight, were worthless in his eyes. Retaining them was nothing but a burden; better to kill them as soon as possible and be done with it. He had already hung the head of the commanding general of Third Sand Camp on the watchtower and slaughtered the captured battle steeds. If not for his fear of Amur, he wouldn’t have remained here in Third Sand Camp to await orders. He had conquered this place; all he wanted was

to charge forward and be first among the Twelve Tribes of Biansha to breach the Northeast Provisions Trail.

Long after midnight, silence reigned in the sleeping camp.

The Liaoying tribe's failed sneak attack on Border Camp the day before had sent Huhelu into a rage. As punishment, the attack squadron from the Liaoying tribe was deprived of food and punished with night watch duty so they couldn't sleep. The soldier on the watchtower was so exhausted his eyes were glazing over.

The night sky was quiet, disturbed only by a gentle breeze. The soldier on the watchtower rubbed at his eyes. In the faint light of the torches, he saw the grass in the distance stir in the wind. The walls of Third Sand Camp were high and sturdy; from his vantage on the watchtower, he couldn't see the foot of the thick walls.

As he yawned, he heard a rustling noise.

It sounded just like the rustle of the grass in the wind—but the noise soon repeated, swelling into what sounded like tidal waves rushing through the fields. The soldier's ears twitched. He leaned over the side of the watchtower to look beyond the camp, but it was too dark to make anything out.

Without warning, a row of hands reached out over the battlement, followed by a row of men swinging up in unison. Both parties looked at each other, equally stunned.

The soldier from the Liaoying tribe reacted swiftly. Even while trading wide-eyed stares with the strangers, he let out a long whistle. The sound resonated through Third Sand Camp. Huhelu, who had only just fallen asleep, bolted awake and pulled on his boots.

He lifted the tent flap and was about to rush to his horse when Bayim stopped him. "Huhelu, we don't know anything about the enemy forces! We might be falling for a trap if we pursue them so rashly."

As Huhelu hesitated, a rain of arrows whistled down from the top of the fortress walls. Enraged, he shoved Bayim aside and mounted his horse. "Those Border Camp fools are all useless! There's no elite company from

the Libei Armored Cavalry there—they're trying to launch a sneak attack under the cover of darkness to rattle me. Get on your horse. The battle steeds of Libei can't outrun us!"

"We haven't received the esuhuri's orders yet!" Bayim tugged at Huhelu's reins and rushed to say, "This is bizarre! Border Camp should be short manpower. If they dare to attack, they must have come prepared! Huhelu, it's a trap! We should remain here. As long as we don't open the gate, they can't breach the walls!"

Huhelu spurred his horse on, dragging Bayim a few staggering steps. He whipped his riding crop around to point at Bayim. "Studying their books has turned you foolish! To hell with sitting on the camp like a hen on eggs. We are eagles that pursue our enemies across the prairies. If we remain here, we'll be defeated!"

There were fewer than five hundred attackers scaling the walls, but they'd already gained control of the great bows on the battlements, preventing the responding Biansha soldiers from getting near. The sharp-eyed Huhelu immediately spotted the ropes and the unfamiliar soldiers still clambering over the walls one after another.

"That's not the Libei Armored Cavalry." Bayim climbed atop his horse and chased after Huhelu. "That's not the Libei Armored Cavalry!"

But Huhelu didn't care who the enemy was. He had fought Guo Weili, leading one of Libei Armored Cavalry's most elite forces, at the border of Tudalung Banner, then swept southeast and taken Third Sand Camp. He was a mighty general blessed by the gods of Gedal. In his own mind, he was well on his way to becoming an invincible legend of the battlefield—even if he came face-to-face with Zhao Hui's main forces, he would face them without flinching.

The heavy, overhanging gate of the camp opened with a loud rumble. Huhelu led his elite troops out on their horses; yet what met him wasn't the gentle night breeze, but the bright flare of a flaming arrow.

The bridleway outside the camp had been strewn with hay. The fire burned but did not blaze; billows of thick smoke poured into the night and blocked Huhelu's way forward. He choked, unable to direct his horse. The

thick smoke threw the Biansha Horsemen into disarray; they had no way to see the path ahead in the darkness. Worried they were riding into an ambush, Huhelu reined his horse around and led his cavalry away from the bridleway, charging into the grassy fields.

Within a few strides, the hooves of their horses sank beneath them. The ponies of the Goushe tribe were fast; the cavalry in the lead stumbled, and those behind, unable to rein in their horses in time, crashed into the leading line. Between one blink and another, they all went down.

Huhelu rolled into the grass and saw the freshly dug pits in the ground along with scattered caltrops. The caltrops were all too familiar—they were the same spikes set up around the outskirts of Third Sand Camp. He had never expected the enemy to move them right under his feet without making a sound.

“Retreat!” Bayim was right behind them. “It’s an ambush!”

Huhelu staggered to his feet and heard a loud bellow. Tantai Hu, who had been lying in the grass in wait, charged forward, blade drawn. More than a thousand men from the Imperial Army followed him, rising from the billowing grass to engage the Biansha Horsemen who had fallen from their horses.

Tantai Hu had been itching for a fight with the Biansha Horsemen half his life. He didn’t recognize Huhelu, but he recognized these horses. The tragic massacre of the cities after the defeat of Zhongbo’s troops was vivid in his mind as blade crashed against blade. Tantai Hu, true to his name, attacked like a furious tiger leaping down from its mountain with a roar. He advanced on Huhelu, his powerful strikes forcing the man back again and again in a retreat.

The Biansha Horsemen were too used to fighting the Libei Armored Cavalry, and the Imperial Army’s advantages over them quickly became apparent. The Imperial Army operated nothing like the enemy they knew, wielding their blades with an extraordinary deviousness amid the dark stands of grass. After losing their horses and now faced with shorter blades than they were used to, Huhelu’s elite troops struggled to meet the attacks as they usually would. The terrifying weight of Libei’s men and horses was

gone. On the ground, the Imperial Army's blades moved just as swiftly as the Biansha Horsemen's scimitars.

Even so, Huhelu soon realized his attackers were few in number; they couldn't even fully encircle his men. Although Tantai Hu was fearsome in his strikes, he was fueled entirely by righteous ardor. Within these vast plains, they had no more reinforcements to call upon. This so-called ambush was merely a handful of men and some pits they had dug in the ground.

Rage surged over Huhelu. He slashed a man down and pressed forward toward Tantai Hu, bellowing, "So, it's just a few rats!"

Tantai Hu had already been wounded. He kicked Huhelu away, dashed the blood and sweat from his eyes, and charged forward recklessly once again. The longer Tantai Hu fought, the more convinced Huhelu grew that they had no more men; otherwise, reinforcements would have appeared by now.

Both sides fought viciously for the better part of an hour before Tantai Hu and his men fell back in disarray. Without horses, they could only beat a hasty retreat on foot across the grass. Yet Huhelu's bloodlust was at an unprecedented high—how could he stand to let Tantai Hu go? He regrouped the horsemen who still had mounts and, brandishing his scimitar, led them in hot pursuit, his curses muffled by the night wind. The Imperial Army's provocation had infuriated him; he was determined to run them down and sacrifice them to his blade.

Pressing a hand to his injured arm, Tantai Hu dashed wildly through the grass without looking back. He was panting heavily and nearly tripped several times. Huhelu was right on his heels. As fast as Tantai Hu ran, he couldn't outrun the horses; it took no time at all for the Biansha Horsemen to catch up.

A sweat-drenched Tantai Hu covered his buttocks—nearly slashed in half by a Biansha scimitar—and shouted into the open fields before him, "Fuck your mothers!"

Battle drums sounded on the horizon, the beat so thunderous it made the riders' ears ache. Realizing something was amiss, Huhelu reined in his

horse and scanned his surroundings. In the next moment, dense clusters of men rose from the tall grass, wearing grass crowns that concealed them amid the growth in the darkness such that Huhelu could get no clear count of them.

His horse restlessly stamped in place. He stared, frozen, as torches flared to life one after the other, a bright line stretching out like a dragon from the spot toward which Tantai Hu was fleeing and extending past the horizon. The concentrated din of the drums sent the alarm bells in Huhelu's mind jangling. He saw at once that he had played into the enemy's hands—the main forces of Libei were here, and their numbers far surpassed those of his own men.

"Retreat," Huhelu commanded sharply as he yanked his horse around. "*Retreat!*"

As his horse broke into a gallop, he heard the sound of frantic hoofbeats flanking him. Snowcrest had charged to the head of the group. To Huhelu's surprise, the horse quickly overtook his swift pony. Glancing over, a sudden and visceral terror struck his heart—he almost thought Xiao Fangxu himself was at his shoulder. But Xiao Chiye was even taller than his father. As the two sped through the night, Huhelu got a clear look at a pair of eyes completely unlike Xiao Fangxu's, brimming with a greed so insatiable it shook him to the core.

Huhelu felt the hair on his neck rise. He understood from that gaze that there would be no escape for him. Sharp fangs were pressing in, inches away. Attempting to break free of the terrifying pressure, he lashed viciously at his horse with his riding crop. He remembered now. In the eastern mountain range nine years ago, this wolf pup had bitten off a chunk of his flesh. He'd had exponentially more men than Libei, yet he had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of a half-grown youth covered in sewer filth.

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The horse galloped, wild with pain, breaking up the loose formation of the Biansha cavalry. Huhelu could see the gate of Third Sand Camp ahead. He opened his mouth to call out to Bayim for help, but his lips had barely parted before the sky spun, and his head rolled off into the grass.

Xiao Chiye charged his way through the Biansha Horsemen's formation. With every slash, drops of blood flew from Wolfsfang, the spatters of warm blood staining his cheeks. He pulled back on the reins and wiped blood off with his thumb, careful not to stain his ring.

Huhelu's horse was still running when the headless body on its back slid off and tumbled to the dirt before the camp, slowly watering the grass with its master's blood.

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Chapter 134:
Mengzheng

HUHELU WAS KNOWN among the Changjiu tribe as the person most likely to become an esuhuri—a true hero. Although he was a cruel and brutal man, he was skilled in combat, and his company comprised the very best from the various Biansha tribes. These cavalrymen had only fear and no reverence for Huhelu, yet it was precisely because of this fear that the shock of his death hit them like a boulder to the chest.

In the blink of an eye, Huhelu had been cut down, and crashing down with him came the morale of the Biansha Horsemen. In his hasty conclusion that there were countless Libei reinforcements on their way, Huhelu had snuffed out the determination of his men—now without a commanding general—to fight on. With Xiao Chiye as the epicenter, they scattered in all directions.

The long ribbon of torches snaked toward them from behind, as if a procession of a million valiant soldiers approached through the grasses.

Within Third Sand Camp, Gu Jin had also launched a surprise attack. Bayim was trapped between the forces inside and out. Upon seeing Xiao Chiye's composure, he too assumed the main forces of Libei had followed him. A final glance into the distance made him sure: He could see obscure shadows behind those torches that seemed to stretch along the tall grass all the way to the far edge of the earth.

Bayim didn't mean to repeat Huhelu's mistakes. Pulling on the reins to urge his horse back, he gave the command to abandon the camp. The Biansha Horsemen retreated with such haste that they didn't even collect Huhelu's corpse before scattering into the night.

Xiao Chiye stopped where he was. Tantai Hu gave chase with his men and put on a good show, shouting and baying for blood as he pursued them for a mile in the dark. When he was certain Bayim didn't dare turn around, he silently called back his men and returned to Third Sand Camp.

When Bayim finally looked again, he could still see those flickering torches extending into the distance.

In fact, had he been willing to look a little more closely—or perhaps if he had been able to tamp down his panic—he would have realized that tonight's raid was odd in more ways than one.

Huhelu's abilities were a cut above in every way, but as he himself knew, he was a general to be reckoned with when it came to battles in rough terrain—sending him to guard a camp and wait on the defensive was a misuse of his talents. If he had heeded Bayim's advice and remained in Third Sand Camp instead of racing out, he could have swiftly dealt with the small infiltration force Gu Jin had led into the camp and gained the upper hand. With its gate shut, Third Sand Camp was an impenetrable fortress. Xiao Chiye had no siege engines with which to attack its walls; there was no way his army could force its way in. However, following his recent string of victories, Huhelu had become complacent. He was weak to trickery and deception; when he saw Gu Jin scaling the walls, he had assumed it was a raid from Border Camp, and when he saw the innumerable torches he thought it was the Libei Armored Cavalry's reinforcements. By the time he saw Xiao Chiye, he had been thrown into total disarray; he was defeated before the battle had even begun.

Xiao Chiye lifted Huhelu's head. He scrutinized the stubble-roughened face for a moment but couldn't place it. He handed the head to Tantai Hu, who refused to take it, so he passed it to Gu Jin instead. "Clean up the bodies in the camp. Bury our brothers from Libei nearby, and bury the soldiers from Biansha farther away. The corpses can't be kept long in this heat. We don't want an epidemic."

Gu Jin took the head and was stunned to see it was Huhelu. He had never expected Xiao Chiye to hack this general down on their very first encounter. Guo Weili had fought this man for half his lifetime, yet in the end, Xiao Chiye had bested him in a night.

"What is it?" Xiao Chiye asked as he unbuckled Wolfsfang. "You know him?"

“His name is Huhelu,” Gu Jin replied. “Master, he’s the one who put Guo Weili on the back foot in the north and occupied Tudalung Banner.”

Xiao Chiye had been on the move for two nights in a row and had other matters to attend to, so he merely nodded before sending Gu Jin away to bury the dead. He called for Tantai Hu to join him and tossed Wolfsfang to him as they headed inside together.

“This camp sure is big.” Tantai Hu surveyed their surroundings and marveled, “These walls might rival those of an actual city. There are great bows on the battlements and pitfalls at the foot; from here, you’d be able to fight off any attackers at close quarters or from afar.”

“My brother spent a lot of money on this place.” Xiao Chiye looked up at the walls. “Memorize the layout of those battlements. If there’s anything you don’t understand, ask Chen Yang or Gu Jin. I’ll have the military craftsmen get you a map of the camp tomorrow. You’ll have to know that by heart too.”

Tantai Hu hastily accepted his orders. Anyone with eyes could see Xiao Chiye was planning to entrust Tantai Hu with some heavy responsibilities. Ever since they left Qudu, Xiao Chiye had brought Tantai Hu along for every battle. Despite being barely literate, Tantai Hu had been trying hard to learn how to read from Chen Yang so he wouldn’t let Xiao Chiye down; this was his sincere effort to be worthy of his commander’s recognition of his abilities.

Xiao Chiye wanted to first see the craftsmen. He had laid the stakes out plainly for Wu Ziyu, but there was one thing he had chosen not to mention—he had no plans to return Third Sand Camp after reclaiming it. This place possessed the best of both offense and defense, and acted as a protective shield for Border Camp. It could provide Xiao Fangxu with reinforcements to the north, and access the Northeast Provisions Trail to the west. It was simply too convenient a location. Whoever wanted it back would have to come and negotiate with him in person.

By the time Xiao Chiye managed to lie down, dawn was lightening the sky in the east. He slept in the tent for several hours, during which time Chen Yang arrived from Border Camp but did not disturb him. It was nearly

dusk when Xiao Chiye awoke again. As he stood outside the tent, bent at the basin to wash his face, he heard the sound of Meng returning.

Xiao Chiye secured his armguard and whistled for Meng, who circled in the air briefly before landing on Xiao Chiye's arm. Xiao Chiye took out strips of meat from a leather bag and fed his bird; as Meng ate, he saw the large walnut tied to his leg.

"His Lordship is well." Chen Yang laughed. "He's letting you know he's safe and sound."

But Xiao Chiye didn't smile. In fact, he was quite displeased. He removed the walnut and weighed it in his hand for a moment before tossing it to Chen Yang. "If he's sent Meng back like this, he's conveying his orders. Open it up and read it to me. The old man's up to no good."

Chen Yang opened the walnut and smoothed out the paper tightly folded inside.

Xiao Fangxu's handwriting was bold and wild. He wrote that he had long known Amur would send his men to Third Sand Camp, but made no mention of why advance measures hadn't been taken. He also asked if Meng had secretly beaten up Yu, and commented that Meng was too combative, just like Xiao Chiye. Finally, he told Xiao Chiye not to act recklessly. He was to remain where he was and await orders.

Xiao Chiye turned the letter over with a finger, skimmed through the scrawled paragraphs on the front side, then pointed at a few concise sentences on the back. Chen Yang cleared his throat and read out in a steady voice, "No one knows a son better than his father. By the time this letter arrives, it'll be too late. I know you'll definitely go for Third Sand Camp. In that case, you can handle the escort and transportation in Wu Ziyu's place… as the general in charge of supplies."

It was dead silent all around.

Tantai Hu had never met Xiao Fangxu. In his mind, even if the Prince of Libei refused to praise his second son, he still ought to send Xiao Chiye to the battlefield. Letting Xiao Chiye rack up honor and glory on the battlefield as soon as possible was the best recognition he could give him. In Libei's present situation, appointing Xiao Chiye as a supply officer

behind the scenes was akin to clipping the talons his son had brandished in Qudu. Had the Prince of Libei gone mad? Or would he really hide Xiao Chiye away for another nine years to appease the heir’s supporters?

Xiao Chiye pressed his lips into a tight line and endured the silence for a while. Without a word, he turned aside to watch the sun once again setting in the west.

Several days later, a caravan of traveling merchants set out from Cizhou and made their way south along the public road toward Chazhou. Kong Ling played the role of steward, while the Embroidered Uniform Guard members disguised themselves as the attendants and servants of a wealthy family. Shen Zechuan, using illness as a pretext, remained within the carriage and rarely showed himself.

Kong Ling had brought along an official travel permit issued by Cizhou, which saved them a considerable amount of trouble along the way. In these troubled times, those who were able to obtain legitimate official documents could not be underestimated. Moreover, traveling as they did with a large number of guards, common bandits didn’t dare rob them recklessly lest they offend someone powerful.

The beggars along the road multiplied tenfold after they left Cizhou. Children as young as eight or nine were seen panhandling in order to survive. They made all kinds of wild, exaggerated claims—even warning of immortals and monsters—in hopes of cajoling passing merchants into spending a bit of coin for peace of mind and safe passage.

The first few days passed without incident, but toward the latter half of their journey, it rained, and the weather abruptly turned cold. Shen Zechuan fell ill soon after. Swindlers and charlatans abounded in every town they passed, and shady shops lined the streets one after another; even if Kong Ling dared call for a physician, Qiao Tianya wouldn’t let them within three feet of Shen Zechuan. Fortunately, his illness was not serious; his fever persisted for only two days before it slowly receded.

Shen Zechuan was now spending more and more time hunched over his desk; it was inevitable that he neglected his martial arts training. After

Qi Huilian's passing, he often found his body easily overwhelmed and became prone to falling ill with the changing of seasons. In truth, there had been warning signs even back in Qudu, when he had fallen so abruptly ill during the pox outbreak.

The carriage rolled over the mud for days and arrived in Chazhou amid pouring rain.

When Luo Mu, the prefect of Chazhou, received Kong Ling's visitation card, he was in his concubine's room. He turned it front to back several times, looking it over as though preparing to perform some magic trick. Still, he remained seated right where he was.

His fourteenth concubine was new to his household; they had just held the wedding banquet a few days ago. As his most recent favorite, she was inevitably spoiled and pampered. The girl could read a few words; she took the letter from Luo Mu's hands and asked, "Who's Kong Ling?"

Luo Mu pulled her onto his lap. "Kong Ling? A dirt-poor scholar. In his early years, he was a subordinate of Tantai Long, the commander of the Dunzhou Garrison Troops. After the man died, he went to work for Zhou Gui."

The concubine giggled as Luo Mu nuzzled her with his beard. As if afraid of being contaminated by poverty, she pinched the visitation card between her fingers with her pinky delicately extended. "Then how did he come to know my lord?"

Luo Mu's tone was laced with self-mockery. "We were fellow students under the same teacher."

"Oh my, then you'll have to be a good host to him." This concubine was always giving Luo Mu's principal wife a headache. She was the younger sister of Cai Yu, one of the bandits in Chazhou on whom Luo Mu relied for backing, and wanted nothing more than for Luo Mu to divorce his principal wife in her favor. Seeing a visit by outsiders as the perfect pretext to play hostess on her own, she flirtatiously swatted Luo Mu with the letter. "I'll host a banquet for you, and you can invite my elder brother here too, to put Cizhou in their place. I heard a portion of Libei's military grain came from Cizhou this year. These people have money."

Instead of acquiescing, Luo Mu protested, “Why go to the expense of a banquet? We can dismiss him with a handful of cornmeal buns. Far from having money, he’s probably here to borrow some. I won’t see him.”

But the concubine wouldn’t budge on her idea and threw a little tantrum, pouting like a spoiled child before Luo Mu. The letter slid to the ground as she whined.

Luo Mu’s eyes followed the letter as it fluttered down. He put a hand on his concubine’s arm. “It’s not too late to meet with him when we next go to Cizhou. Look, the letter has fallen—pick it up.”

Seeing that her gentler attempts at persuasion had failed, she rose to her feet and threw a fit. Her delicate embroidered shoe landed right on the letter. She stomped a few times more and cried, “I haven’t entertained any guests on my lord’s behalf since I married into the family! All of us are formally wedded to you, so why am I always an afterthought? I swear—”

Before she could finish, she saw Luo Mu’s expression turn frosty. “Move!”

Concubine Cai had been doted on since the day she had married Luo Mu; he had never raised his voice or scolded her. His rebuke came as a shock, and she shuddered before shuffling a few stunned steps back.

Luo Mu bent to pick up the letter. There was a shoe print on it that couldn’t be wiped clean. He stashed the letter away with a glum expression, then took Concubine Cai’s hand and forced a smile. “You don’t need to concern yourself with affairs in the front hall. I’ll have a proper chat with Brother-in-Law myself. I have to go; I’ll come see you later.”

Without waiting for her to recover from her surprise, he lifted the curtain and strode out.

The rain was still coming down outside. A servant opened up an umbrella, and Luo Mu briskly walked under it. “Is he still here? Invite him to the front hall. I’ll see him now.”

When Luo Mu arrived, Kong Ling had been waiting for some time. Upon seeing Luo Mu heading up the steps, he rose to meet him. The two

men smiled the moment they saw each other. Luo Mu gestured for Kong Ling to take a seat, and they proceeded to exchange pleasantries before getting down to business.

“It’s also at His Excellency’s direction that I’ve come to see you.” Kong Ling took a sip of tea. “In recent years, things in Cizhou have gradually improved. The fields are recovering, and there is an abundance of grain. However, the population in Cizhou has been in steep decline; we can’t consume as much as we produce. If we store the remaining grain for a year, it’s likely to grow mold or end up gnawed on by mice.”

Luo Mu listened attentively as Kong Ling spoke, noting his healthy complexion and his very few strands of white hair.

Kong Ling met Luo Mu’s gaze and gave him another smile. “So we were thinking. The prefecture of Chazhou has been buying grain from Hezhou and Juexi at high prices for years. You must know you’re getting badly ripped off. Why not work something out between our two prefectures? We’re close to each other, so transport will also be convenient. We’re willing to offer you a price lower than what you can get from Juexi. What do you think?”

With a start, Luo Mu realized there were wrinkles around Kong Ling’s eyes now when he smiled. Looking as though he’d awakened from a dream, he averted his gaze and thought for a moment before saying, “I see your point. It’s a good idea. But it can’t be done.” Clearly Kong Ling still had more to say, but Luo Mu raised a hand to stop him. “Chazhou is not Cizhou. It’s courageous indeed of Zhou Gui to get up and put his plans to action, but how much of his courage was built upon the support of his father-in-law? Cizhou is only in the position it is today because Lord Liu resolved years ago to eradicate the bandits in Cizhou. That isn’t the case here.”

Kong Ling had expected this. He fell silent for a spell, then said, “Mengzheng, is there no chance at all?”

On hearing Kong Ling speak his courtesy name, Luo Mu hastily turned his face aside.

Kong Ling recognized that Luo Mu was in a difficult spot. He continued, “Cizhou has rebuilt its garrison troops. If this deal goes through, we’re willing to lend our assistance to the vital task of eradicating the bandits in Chazhou. Mengzheng, the world is in turmoil, and heroes and villains of all sorts will no doubt rise from among the people. As long as you live among them, you can’t stay clear of the conflict. You and I have been friends since we were students together, and share the bond of learning under the same teacher. Why not use this opportunity to free yourself from the influence of the bandits?”

“You and Zhou Gui are in Cizhou; how can you understand what I’m dealing with here?” Luo Mu turned back to Kong Ling. “If the bandits in Chazhou are so easy to dispose of, why didn’t you come to me all those years ago instead of going to work for Zhou Gui?”

Before Kong Ling could explain, Luo Mu had risen to his feet. “At the moment, our grain is all purchased at high prices from Juexi and Hezhou. Various bandit chiefs have a hand in this business, and everyone takes a cut of the profit. You want me to buy grain from Cizhou instead, but that means cutting off the bandits’ source of income. This is an impossible deal. If word of this gets out, you and I will both be in danger. You should go back.”

After summoning an attendant to see the guest out, Luo Mu took a few steps out the door, then turned back to glance at Kong Ling.

They hadn’t seen each other for many years. Strangely enough, no matter how old Kong Ling looked now, the way he had looked as a student remained firmly etched in Luo Mu’s mind. Wind blew the rain under the eaves and dampened Luo Mu’s shoulders, yet he stood unmoving as the moments stretched.

Kong Ling had missed plenty in his life, and he could feel this moment slipping away, too. Unable to see Luo Mu’s face clearly with the sunlight behind him, he merely said, “I’m determined to succeed. If we can’t reach an agreement today, I’ll return tomorrow. Mengzheng, I’m confident we can make this work as long as you’re willing to discuss it with us.”

Luo Mu was dumbstruck. “Who else did you bring with you that you’re bold enough to say this? You showed official paperwork from Cizhou when you entered the city, and you delivered your visitation card to meet me; you’ve already exposed yourself. I’d advise you not to act rashly. Lie low for a few days, then go back to Cizhou like I told you.”

Without waiting for Kong Ling to reply, he lifted his robe and went down the steps.

Later, as Shen Zechuan took his medicine and listened to Qiao Tianya’s report of the two men’s conversation, he couldn’t help but turn and give Qiao Tianya a speaking look.

Qiao Tianya nodded in understanding. “They were fellow students for many years; naturally, they share a close friendship. In Master’s view, how should we negotiate this deal? Luo Mu is an interesting character. Although Chazhou is a mess, his position as prefect remains unshakeable.”

“We’ll negotiate however we must.” Shen Zechuan’s nose was still congested, and his speech sounded slightly muffled. “Since he’s still standing, it means he has set his mind to remain so. Of what he said today, half were empty words; we must find out which of them are sincere.”

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Chapter 135:
Earring

THE RAIN STOPPED the next day, but the sky was still blanketed in gray clouds.

Concubine Cai, after being rebuked the day before, claimed illness before dawn and remained in her chambers. Luo Mu had not slept well either. After his breakfast, a servant came to report that Cai Yu had sent him an invitation to a small gathering.

Luo Mu accepted, knowing full well the purpose behind Cai Yu's summons. He wiped his hands. Without even changing his robe, he said, "Prepare the sedan; I'll go over now. Let's not keep my brother-in-law waiting."

Cai Yu was a prominent bandit in Chazhou whom even Yan Heru of Hezhou addressed as *Pa*. He was generous with his money and made a point of offering financial assistance to various smaller bandits, and thus had a warm reputation among them as a loyal and righteous man who was always ready to help. However, he did not get along with Lei Changming from Mount Luo, though no one could say why. All they knew was that before Lei Changming's death, neither one would acknowledge the other's existence during the bandits' gatherings and feasts.

By the time Luo Mu arrived at the Cai manor, Cai Yu had treated his guests to a round of food and drinks. Cai Yu's manor was even more luxuriously appointed than Luo Mu's, and kept running by more than a thousand servants. However, he was not a man who was particular about formalities: Most of his visitors were bandits and robbers. The gatherings he held were lusty feasts that boasted all manner of roast meats and strong drink.

The moment Cai Yu saw Luo Mu, he leaned back in his chair and beckoned him over with a smile. "Mengzheng, you're late. As punishment, you have to drink three cups of wine. Come, take a seat."

Luo Mu had always been submissive before Cai Yu; he complied at once and settled himself. Even when he saw the unusually dressed strangers at the table, he asked no questions. Cai Yu waited for Luo Mu to finish his drinks before speaking. “I heard my little sister displeased you yesterday?”

Looking panicked, Luo Mu started, “Brother—”

“You were right to tell her off!” Cai Yu laid a heavy hand on Luo Mu’s arm and said with a smile, “You’re her husband. The man is in charge of the front hall. There are plenty of things that are none of her business. She’s been spoiled at home, and it seems getting married didn’t teach her any better. In the future, you just tell her off when you need to. Don’t hold back on my account. Her tantrums are getting out of hand.”

Cai Yu spoke of what had happened in Luo Mu’s inner chambers as if he’d been there himself. His hand on Luo Mu’s arm didn’t apply much pressure, but it was precisely this light touch that showed the scope of his control. If he told Luo Mu to head left, Luo Mu wouldn’t dare go right. Luo Mu was an official who had passed the imperial examinations to enter government service in Qudu the proper way and had undergone official reviews before receiving this governing post. But what did any of that matter? In Chazhou, Luo Mu was nothing but a yes-man. Out here, heaven was high, and the emperor was far; such remote cities were beyond the reach of central authorities. Banditry in Zhongbo had been a serious issue as far back as the reign of Yongyi. Before the fall of Zhongbo, the bandits here didn’t give two hoots about their lord Shen Wei, Prince of Jianxing. And after the massacre of the cities, they gave even less of a damn about anything—or anyone—from Qudu.

A sheen of sweat covered Luo Mu’s brow.

Satisfied with this reaction, Cai Yu retracted his hand and laughed. “Do you know, I’ve been hearing such bizarre news. Half a month ago, I heard there was going to be a new emperor on the dragon throne in Qudu. That chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, Han Cheng, was so anxious he scampered back to his hometown to dig up some child to be the imperial heir. Well who would’ve expected Secretariat Elder Hai to get so upset over it he bashed his head into a column in the great hall and

killed himself? The way I heard it, blood and brains splattered all over Han Cheng, and he got so scared he pissed himself right there."

Everyone burst out laughing. The rumors circulating in Zhongbo had long rendered Han Cheng as a sniveling scoundrel who bowed and scraped before the throne's authority.

After Cai Yu was done laughing, he huffed out a long sigh. "Even though we bandits make shady deals and work outside of the law, we value loyalty and benevolence as much as any man. I have nothing but respect for the secretariat elder for what he did. As the saying goes, men who wield swords die in battles, while men who wield brushes die in remonstrations. Our Great Zhou has been through three rulers in such a short time. Emperors are dying one after another, and upright ministers like Secretariat Elder Hai are rarer by the day."

Luo Mu listened in silence, never looking up from his bowl. He seemed wholly focused on eating, though he only dared pick at the food set right before him, lest he draw attention to himself. Although he was dignified in appearance, his behavior gave the impression of someone weak and cowering.

Cai Yu did not look at Luo Mu again. He was speaking with gusto now. "But I bet even the secretariat elder himself didn't expect the throne he kept from the Han Clan's child to go to a woman. Have you ever heard of such a thing since the founding of our Great Zhou? Is this not a violation of the natural order, an upending of yin and yang? This is an omen signaling the collapse of the empire! I'd rather follow the orders of an ignorant child than a woman. How can any red-blooded man pay obeisance to a woman?! Sure, Qidong has Qi Zhuyin. But if you ask me, she just happened to be in the right place at the right time and took advantage of the empress dowager being in power. Otherwise, where would she get off being a marshal? If Qudu has a female emperor next—ugh, what a mess!"

A chorus of agreement rose all around. One man with a beard smacked the table and said, "Elder Cai is right. That's just what it is. What the hell even is a female emperor? The last few emperors were awful indeed, but the law of heaven is just as Laozi-xiansheng[4] said: The man is in charge of administration. There's no way I'll let myself be ruled by a

woman. Even if the entire court of civil and military officials bends their knees and pays her obeisance as subjects to a monarch, well that just makes them a nest of sniveling cowards. It's no wonder they've let the Twelve Tribes of Biansha harass us all these years."

"When it comes to women, marrying and keeping the home are their duties," Cai Yu agreed. "No harm done if we dote on them a little and raise them into pampered, delicate ladies. But if you let them go out and fight battles or lead the government, it's a disaster waiting to happen." He sighed with emotion. "I heard the students in Qudu are all for her. I'd say all that studying turned them stupid! They can't even tell right from wrong."

Their conversation ranged from the political battles in Qudu to the military affairs in Qidong, and then to the ongoing war in Libei. Finally, the topic landed on Lei Changming.

The bearded man spoke up again. "Lei Changming was another one who got a lucky break—he just happened to be in the right spot to help Yan-gongzi out when he was in distress. A man like him would never have lasted long. He was too ambitious; he wanted to establish a regular army in Mount Luo. Well sure enough, the Imperial Army went and took him down."

Cai Yu snorted coldly.

The man next to him said, "Elder Cai and Lei Changming were hailed as the Twin Heroes of Zhongbo, but how does Lei Changming deserve such an honor? He never even came close to our Elder Cai!"

Cai Yu was unmoved by this flattery. He spread his arms wide and sank comfortably back into the chair. "Do you know why I turn my nose up at Lei Changming? Because I find him *filthy*." The maidservant came over with his pipe, and he took two puffs before continuing. "Lei Changming worked as an armed escort for merchant caravans in his earlier years. Everyone knows that part, but do you know why he stopped? He claimed it was because he married his younger sister off to the Zhu family in Duanzhou, and wanted to retire and live in comfort. But that's not it. You see, he had a particular vice."

At some point, Luo Mu had set aside his chopsticks.

Blowing out a cloud of smoke, Cai Yu continued, “When I first took up this trade and was ready to strike out on my own, my shifu told me one must be a righteous man even as a bandit or a robber. There are some things you must not touch—depraved acts will bring you bad karma. Plenty of traveling merchants with families come through Chazhou, but I’ve never laid my hands on any of the widows or orphans I’ve come across. But not Lei Changming. He used to accompany some families as an armed escort. One time when he was on a job in Dengzhou, the man of the house died in the middle of the journey, leaving a hapless orphan and a widow who couldn’t even afford to pay his wages. When they arrived in Dengzhou, the man’s family only wanted their grandson, not the daughter-in-law. The woman was unwilling to part with her child and planned to kill herself in desperation. Lei Changming brought the mother and son back home with him, saying he’d provide for them both.

“I was still a young robber in Chazhou at the time. When I heard about this incident, I thought, *what a man*! I felt Lei Changming was different from people like me—he was the kind of chivalrous hero my shifu spoke of. I thought highly of him, and I always kept an eye out for him when I was on the road working. I wanted to find a chance to become sworn brothers with the man. But later, when I went to Dengzhou, I heard he quit. When I tracked him down, I learned both the woman and child had died. How did they die, you ask? He brutalized them after drinking one night—he laid his hands on a child no more than six years of age. The woman resisted, so he beat her to death. The child was tormented beyond recognition, and died just a few days after his mother.”

Cai Yu waved away the smoke and frowned as he gestured for the maidservant to take the pipe away. “When he popped up again in Duanzhou, this vice of his didn’t change. Lei Changming valued his reputation, so he never dared indulge too openly. Young Master Yan was very young when Lei Changming saved him. I was friends with Old Master Yan back then, and the Yan Clan had helped me out a time or two. Even though I hadn’t met the young master back then, I thought of him as my own treasured child. When I heard Lei Changming had him, I ran for four days and nights without rest to get to Mount Luo and get him back. The young master wore a bright jade earring at the time—a gift from his family,

making him look all the more precious. He was smart as a whip, too. The second he saw me, he called me ‘Pa.’ It was hard not to feel protective of the kid. Since the young master seemed unharmed, I didn’t bother pushing the point with Lei Changming.”

Yet afterward, Lei Changming had felt self-conscious every time he encountered Cai Yu. He knew Cai Yu looked down on him, so he stayed away; they each kept to themselves.

“And the young master is a good kid. He was grateful to Lei Changming for saving him, so he helped the bandits of Mount Luo more than a few times.”

Cai Yu had meant to ask Luo Mu about Kong Ling today, but he’d gotten carried away recounting the past. By the time he remembered, Luo Mu had taken his leave.

Luo Mu climbed into his sedan and headed for the cosmetics shop, hoping to buy some of the rouge that was all the rage in Qudu to pacify Concubine Cai.

The largest cosmetics shop in Chazhou was owned by a merchant from Juexi, and Luo Mu was a regular there. Almost before he stepped off the sedan, the shopkeeper was coming out to welcome him and serve him tea. He bent toward Luo Mu and said, “Apologies, Your Excellency. Unfortunately, we’re short on stock today. All our best powders are being prepared in the shop on the east end of the city and won’t be here for some time. What if we delivered them to your residence tomorrow? Would that be all right?”

Luo Mu nodded and turned to leave when he recalled the way Cai Yu had pressed down on his arm earlier. Changing his mind, he looked back and asked, “Which shop on the east end?”

The shopkeeper called over a runner to personally lead the way for Luo Mu.

Upon arrival, Luo Mu noted that while the eastern shop was not large, its location was close to the horse paths used to transport cargo and

convenient for loading and unloading goods. Only a few people were browsing inside. The runner led him further in, to a courtyard at the back of the shop, then served him tea and asked him to wait.

Luo Mu sat for a long time. When the hanging screen lifted at last, it was Kong Ling who walked through.

Astonished, Luo Mu started, “What are you—”

In lieu of an answer, Kong Ling held up the curtain and stepped aside, making way for a man in white who ducked slightly to enter. The instant Shen Zechuan raised his head, Luo Mu rose to his feet.

Shen Zechuan had come in a sedan, and was neat and dry despite the pouring rain. He gestured for Luo Mu to sit. Behind him, Qiao Tianya stepped forward and switched out the tea for a fresh pot, then handed a steaming cup to Shen Zechuan.

Seeing Luo Mu still standing, Kong Ling began, “Mengzheng, this is __”

“Vice Commander Shen.” Luo Mu bowed respectfully. “I’ve long heard the vice commander’s reputation. This pupil Luo Mengzheng is glad to receive your wise teachings.”

“Mister Chengfeng has spoken highly of Lord Luo’s prudence and excellent judgment. Today, I’ve seen the truth in his words.” Shen Zechuan smiled faintly. “I am no longer the vice commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. Without an authority token or an official post, I’m merely a common man. It is I who should be paying my respects to Your Excellency.”

But how could Luo Mu dare let this man bow to him? Shen Zechuan had served as an official just steps from the emperor’s side—his position as northern judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard alone was enough to strike fear into the hearts of the prefects of Zhongbo. In the past, the Embroidered Uniform Guard had worked with the Ministry of Justice, the Court of Judicial Review, and the Chief Surveillance Bureau to audit the accounts in the provincial administrations and review the officials’ accomplishments. Furthermore, Shen Zechuan was known to be on good

terms with Cen Yu of the Chief Surveillance Bureau and Kong Qiu of the Ministry of Justice. Luo Mu had more than merely *heard* of him.

Ostensibly, the objective of assigning officials like Luo Mu to posts outside the capital was for them to gain experience. After collecting some political achievements and establishing their credentials, they would be eligible for promotion to an official position in the capital of Qudu. The results of their reviews as an official—the lives of their whole family—lay in the hands of men like Shen Zechuan. It was evident why Luo Mu called himself *this pupil*.

Shen Zechuan was unlike the high-ranking officials of the Embroidered Uniform Guard who had preceded him—he had an unconventional beginning. His father was Shen Wei, notorious for allowing the Biansha Horsemen to slaughter Zhongbo. When he entered the capital six years ago, he had been escorted by the Embroidered Uniform Guard who had collected him from the Libei Armored Cavalry as a prisoner. All the rumors had said he would be executed. Yet not only had he survived, he had been repeatedly promoted by the Tianchen Emperor, defying all rules and traditions. The position of northern judge concerned both factions in Qudu, and yet even Hai Liangyi had given his assent. On top of this, he had achieved it all at such a young age, which was intimidating in and of itself.

Only now did Luo Mu understand that Kong Ling hadn’t been putting on airs when he said he was confident of success. He was genuinely certain, and this young man was why.

Fortunately for Luo Mu’s nerves, Shen Zechuan was simply making conversation and didn’t actually rise to pay his respects. Luo Mu collected himself but still didn’t dare sit. He stood beside Kong Ling with his hands politely at his sides and said, “Please excuse this pupil for not welcoming Your Excellency after you personally came all this way to Chazhou. I’ll send someone at once—”

“I followed the Marquis of Dingdu out of the capital; I am now a traitor to Qudu. There is truly no need for Your Excellency to stand on ceremony.” Shen Zechuan took a sip of hot tea to soothe his sore throat. “I’ve been in Zhongbo for some time now, and I’ve long wanted to meet

Lord Luo. I'm fortunate to have Mister Chengfeng to make introductions for me today."

Kong Ling looked at Luo Mu and smiled. "Mengzheng, there's no need to be so formal. The vice commander has been our staunchest supporter in Cizhou. One of the reasons he's come is to help resolve the issue of bandits in Chazhou. We're all on the same side here."

Luo Mu eyed Kong Ling, his gaze a little more restrained compared to yesterday's. He asked cautiously, "How did you know I'd come here?"

"Chazhou is only so big. One can discover many things with just a little asking around. That fourteenth concubine of yours has strong family backing and a temper to boot, and she loves rouge from Qudu. It's always been your habit to please others by taking note of what they like; it was easy to guess you'd make a personal trip here to pacify the lady." Kong Ling turned to Shen Zechuan with a smile and shook his head. "The vice commander ought to know that Mengzheng was very popular with the girls in his student days, and a notorious flirt. He was an expert in flattery even before he became an official."

Luo Mu relaxed slightly when Kong Ling brought up old times. "I conducted myself with decorum while studying. When would I have had a chance to flirt when I was with you all day long? The way I remember it, it was *you* who had countless friends and called everyone your brother."

Their familiar banter eased the atmosphere. Kong Ling gestured for Luo Mu to take a seat.

Shen Zechuan sat in the seat of honor, yet when he spoke, it wasn't with the overbearing attitude Luo Mu had expected. "I'm sure Mister Chengfeng has shared the purpose of our trip here. You two didn't have time for a thorough discussion yesterday, so it's understandable that Your Excellency has misgivings. Please speak freely today. We can discuss any difficulties you may have."

He was gentle in his speech, his countenance natural and at ease. But despite Shen Zechuan's choice of words, there was clearly no room for "discussion" here. Beneath this placid facade was an unshakable resolve to

grasp what he wanted. This final remark was all it took for Luo Mu to understand Shen Zechuan's intent.

Discuss any difficulties you may have—but what was the purpose of discussion? To facilitate action. Shen Zechuan left Luo Mu no opening to refuse at all. The moment he opened his mouth, he had made it clear that Luo Mu had no choice.

When Luo Mu looked up again, his timidity was gone. "If the vice commander can quell the bandits in Chazhou, I am willing to follow your lead. However, Cai Yu is no Lei Changming, nor is the vice commander the marquis with his twenty thousand mighty soldiers. I'm afraid the strength of a single man may not be enough."

Shen Zechuan was unruffled. "Fear not. Our meeting today is as good as a million mighty soldiers."

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Chapter 136:
Sowing Discord

SHEN ZECHUAN spoke with such confidence because he knew Chazhou was not a place that could be won through sheer military might.

During the reign of Yongyi, Dunzhou and Duanzhou had been the richest and most prosperous prefectures in Zhongbo. Shen Wei had commanded the garrison troops of all the prefectures, yet even with money and soldiers, he still failed to eradicate the bandits of Chazhou. Before Shen Zechuan had embarked on this journey, Zhou Gui and his advisors in Cizhou had prepared a detailed report on the subject, and came to the unanimous conclusion that Chazhou must be won with statecraft, not force.

Cai Yu was indeed no Lei Changming. The biggest difference between the bandits of Chazhou and the bandits of Mount Luo was that those in Chazhou were still highwaymen in the true sense of the word. Meanwhile, those on Mount Luo had banded together and established their own rule in their territory, even making plans for expansion. It was clear that Lei Jingzhe, who had hidden behind Lei Changming for years, was no longer satisfied with being merely a bandit. He desired to cast off his old self and seek legitimacy, while Cai Yu did not. Hence, Cizhou had to fight the bandits of Mount Luo and scheme against those in Chazhou.

Luo Mu was perhaps not as devoted as Zhou Gui was to serving the people, but since Shen Zechuan didn't stop Kong Ling from visiting him the day before, Luo Mu knew they must need him. He had served as the prefect of Chazhou for over ten years; no one understood the ins and outs of the prefecture better than him.

"Your Excellency was assigned to Chazhou during the reign of Yongyi," Shen Zechuan observed. "In that time, you've accomplished quite a list of political feats, and you appealed strongly to Shen Wei to suppress the bandits. However, Chazhou was too far from Dunzhou, and with Fanzhou standing between the two prefectures, Shen Wei found it both too troublesome and expensive for his troops to travel so far. In his mind, the

odds of success were minute; he struck down Your Excellency's request." Shen Zechuan didn't so much as blink as he spoke his father's name. "I noticed that since that time, Your Excellency's approach to governing began to change."

Luo Mu waved a hand. "What political achievements do I have to my name? The vice commander speaks too highly of me. I have accomplished nothing since my arrival in Chazhou. During the reign of Yongyi, Chazhou was notorious for its bandits. Back then, when Qudu was considering which officials to dispatch to the regions outside the capital, Jiang Qingshan and I were both among those they assigned. When I first arrived here, I had a mind to accomplish great things. But it was simply too difficult."

His expression gradually grew solemn. "During my first two years, I tried to revive the garrison troops. Although Shen Wei didn't approve, he didn't stop me either. The Ministry of War thought it was feasible. They increased Chazhou's military expenses according to the recommendations I made in my memorial, and I started equipping Chazhou's garrison. I was ambitious then, wholeheartedly focused on suppressing the bandits. It was only when the real fighting began that I realized how wrong I'd been.

"Bandits have been a problem for Chazhou since before the reign of Yongyi. Long before the garrison troops were established, there was a group of bandits here. In its earliest days, Hezhou wasn't as prosperous as it is now, and the Yan Clan hadn't yet made its fortune. The traders who came through here were mostly wealthy merchants from the thirteen cities of Juexi, and the bandits of Chazhou made their living by robbing these merchants or kidnapping them for ransom. By the time the imperial court perceived the severity of the problem, it was too late; the bandits had already put down roots in Chazhou and flourished into various gangs and factions."

As a result, the population of Chazhou was rowdy and barely constrained by the rule of law. Implementing the Yellow Register here had proved an exceptional challenge, as almost half the people had been bandits at one point or another. Because they could not be considered decent civilian citizens, it seemed the only option was to register them as military households. When the officials of the Eastern Palace deliberated over this,

they determined it would be best if these people were absorbed into the military and made part of a proper army. With military fields to tend and a monthly salary, they could maintain a decent livelihood and feed their families—there would be no more need for them to turn to highway robbery. At the same time, the officials could regulate the movement of the people, keeping them in Chazhou to farm in peace instead of allowing them to run to and fro making trouble for the empire, which would in turn strengthen the governing capabilities of Chazhou's prefect.

In this, however, the officials of the Eastern Palace made a fatal mistake. They were armchair strategists, taking policies Zhongbo had used successfully in other prefectures and implementing them in Chazhou without adapting to local circumstances. The bandits of Chazhou were indeed incorporated into an official army, but the land wasn't as easy to cultivate as that in other areas. These men followed the rules for a short time before they began to simply collect their army salary while continuing to rob people. They no longer even needed to forge documents of travel and access: They could loot and plunder under the guise of catching bandits. They chased after their own shadows, going round and round in circles with the imperial court.

The prefects from the capital were ill-equipped to resist the established might of these local bandits, and Luo Mu was no exception—it wasn't long before reality dealt the bright-eyed new prefect a ruthless lesson.

Yet this was not the end of it. In later years, bandit chiefs like Cai Yu emerged in Chazhou. They spoke of the chivalry and righteousness of the martial arts world and were generous with their riches, willing to lend a hand to like-minded brothers. Over time, their fame spread, and they grew far more popular and admired than the dull and inflexible scholars sent to manage them. The prefect became nothing more than a figurehead, ruling the prefecture in name only.

By this point, Shen Zechuan thought he understood why Shen Wei hadn't been willing to deploy troops.

He didn't have the nerve.

Shen Wei had been conferred the title of Prince of Jianxing, but it was just that—a nice-sounding title. At heart, he was just as much of an outsider as an assigned official like Luo Mu. He had neither opposed nor supported Luo Mu's proposals at the start of Luo Mu's tenure because he was adopting a wait-and-see approach. If Luo Mu's measures succeeded, then he could follow his lead. If Luo Mu failed, he could hold him accountable. He was unwilling to step to the fore and offend the bandits of Chazhou himself, because he understood one thing very well: Compared to Luo Mu, Cai Yu and his ilk were the real rulers of Chazhou.

"But things are different now." Shen Zechuan's throat was slightly hoarse, and he coughed for a moment. "Cai Yu is living off the beneficence of the Yan Clan, and the money he makes is wrung from the tears and blood of the people. Established bandits like him build their wealth on the backs of suffering refugees. Plenty live well inside the city of Chazhou, but the cost is told in the commoners lying dead from starvation along the roads beyond the city walls. Over time, the common folk will come to resent those like him."

"Allow me to speak plainly." Luo Mu weighed his options, then continued cautiously, "After the fall of Zhongbo, the supply of grain in Chazhou shrank, and what remains is pathetic. When the Grand Secretariat transferred the contents of the granaries in the various prefectures to Juexi in the name of disaster relief, it was supposed to be a loan. But Shen Wei was dead, and Qudu never sent anyone to take his place governing Zhongbo. The six prefectures each governed themselves. Simply surviving was an uphill battle, and no one had the time or energy to pursue the debt owed to us by Qudu—they couldn't *afford* to pursue it. Recent years have seen a rise in law-abiding families turning to crime from sheer desperation. Starving and with no other options, these people have little choice but to sink to banditry.

"At first, Cai Yu's bandits in Chazhou provided assistance to the poor. But later, the Yan Clan of Hezhou saw an opportunity to get into the business of selling grain here and made use of Cai Yu's influence to push the Xi Clan's businesses out of Zhongbo. They joined hands and all made a big fortune. Cai Yu's sitting on a mountain of gold in his old age, and he's

grown increasingly fond of the sound of flattery. Gradually, he lost the chivalrous heart he once had. He tore down the porridge tents and grain shops he had set up outside the city for the needy and grew comfortable as the local emperor of Chazhou. Resentful voices filled the streets, but nothing could be done. He is no longer the man he used to be."

Yet even when the mighty fell, they held more power than the common man. Cai Yu still had influence in the south of Zhongbo and in Hezhou. The fact that Yan Heru addressed him as *Pa* also carried weight. It was almost impossible for the smaller bandit factions Luo Mu had privately funded to make a mark. He could only anxiously watch as Chazhou's food supplies dwindled, helpless to act.

A brief silence fell over the room. The half-open windows offered a glimpse of orange jasmine, white petals adorned with drops of rain. The sky was overcast. Quite a while had passed since he had set out on this errand, and Luo Mu couldn't dawdle here much longer.

Despite the open windows, Shen Zechuan found the room stuffy. The cup of tea in his hands had gone cold. When he spoke at last, it was to say something that seemed to contradict all that had come before. "If Cai Yu is wise, he should understand that the so-called resentful voices filling the streets are merely underhanded tricks by the other gangs. As his brother-in-law, Your Excellency ought to give him a reminder or two in this regard."

Luo Mu was taken aback. He didn't understand what Shen Zechuan meant.

Shen Zechuan brushed the tea foam aside with the white, jade-like lid of the cup. "With Lei Changming's death, Cai Yu will become the most renowned bandit chief in all of Zhongbo. This is the perfect moment while he's in high spirits. When it comes to Chazhou and the Yan Clan, he won't tolerate anyone else getting a slice of his pie. What's more, the greatest fear of a man approaching his twilight years is not being the man he once was. If he thinks the wrath of the people is the underhanded work of younger up-and-comers, he won't let them get away with it."

In a flash, Luo Mu understood. He couldn't help but marvel at how ruthless a move this was.

Shen Zechuan wished for Cai Yu to regard public wrath as infighting between his gangs, intentionally incited by his enemies. If he believed this to be true, he would intensify his efforts to suppress the smaller bandits in order to guard his wealth. The smaller bandits were already discontented; should Cai Yu come down hard on them now, their discontent would grow. As long as resentment festered between the two sides, it would be hard for them to join forces again. They might even turn on each other without any outside prompting.

“The smaller gangs Your Excellency previously funded in secret can be put to good use here. Once they’ve taken a beating from Cai Yu, you can give them a helping hand and a generous gift of grain. Gather them up as brothers who will bond in a time of adversity.” Shen Zechuan finished his tea and motioned for Qiao Tianya to refill it. He glanced up at Luo Mu and continued, “When the small come together, they will be a force to be reckoned with. It’s no different from a pack of jackals hunting their prey. We shouldn’t fight him head-on; simply heap fuel on the fire and fan the flames.”

His words gave Luo Mu chills. Merely by dropping Cai Yu a few hints, this man would incite Cai Yu to tear down the things he’d built with his own hands. Sowing discord was not an uncommon strategy, but Shen Zechuan had been in Chazhou a single night. How did he have such a clear picture of Cai Yu and Chazhou? Luo Mu couldn’t help but recall Shen Zechuan’s previous identity—a member of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

“Once we take Cai Yu off the board, we can discuss the trade of grain between our prefectures in detail,” Shen Zechuan said calmly. “In the future, Your Excellency’s stoic endurance of shame and humiliation at the hands of the bandits will become an edifying anecdote in Chazhou. The full stomachs of the commoners will be Your Excellency’s most distinguished political achievement. Even in the other prefectures, you’ll be an official admired by all. Lord Luo, we’ll meet again soon.”

Not long after Luo Mu left, it started raining again.

Shen Zechuan rode in the carriage back to the manor where he was currently residing. When he stepped out and saw the heavy overcoat draped over Qiao Tianya's arm, he commented, "The weather is still warm for now. There's no need for this. Why did you even bring it?"

Tilting the umbrella toward Shen Zechuan, Qiao Tianya said, "It wasn't my idea. Shifu specifically gave the instruction."

Shen Zechuan strode through the door. He had asked Ge Qingqing, still far away in Juexi, to purchase this estate under the guise of other business. It was old, cramped, and in a state of mild disrepair: The front porch was waterlogged, and few flowers or bushes were planted in the courtyard.

"Ever since I arrived in Zhongbo, I've been neglecting my physical training. I've made Shifu worry. When we return, don't tell him about my illness." Shen Zechuan glanced over his shoulder and smiled at Kong Ling as he spoke. "This journey has also been hard on Mister Chengfeng."

Kong Ling hurriedly deflected the acknowledgment.

"Earlier, the orange jasmine outside the window looked so verdant after the rain. It's very soothing on the eyes." Shen Zechuan said offhandedly, "Let's plant some in the residence when we get back."

As they started up the steps, they saw Fei Sheng, who had been waiting just inside, step out to greet them. Not daring to be sloppy in his work, he greeted Shen Zechuan with a smile. "Master has returned at long last."

"Looks like you have good news to report," Shen Zechuan remarked.

"Master is wise." Fei Sheng lifted the hanging screen for Shen Zechuan. "Before I set off, I received some items the marquis sent from Libei. Knowing their importance, I dared not stop on the journey and hurried the whole way here to deliver it."

The man loved to speak in this ingratiating tone. Qiao Tianya laughed out loud; as he followed them in, he teased, "I always find it interesting when Fei the Tenth[5] comes. Quite amusing."

Shen Zechuan removed the wide-sleeved outer robe he wore. “Let me see.”

Ignoring Qiao Tianya, Fei Sheng took the items from his subordinate and presented them to Shen Zechuan. Shen Zechuan touched the leather sack; it was cold.

“The marquis sent someone to deliver it to our manor; he specifically instructed that it be kept on ice. We hadn’t any ice at home, so we had to borrow from Lady Zhou. A pity the ice didn’t last the journey and melted soon after we set out.”

Shen Zechuan was curious, but he didn’t let it show before the others. He pinched the leather sack between his fingertips and noticed it seemed to be filled with liquid. He opened it, but before he could peer inside, he was hit with a sour, pungent smell.

Qiao Tianya was right beside him. Sniffing the air, he asked, “Isn’t this cows’ milk?”

“That can’t be.” Fei Sheng said in puzzlement. “Why would the marquis send milk all that way? It can’t be kept overnight. It’s spoiled.”

They looked at Shen Zechuan, but Shen Zechuan didn’t mind the smell. The corner of his lips lifted slightly in a smile. Sensing their eyes on him, he looked askance at them and asked, “What?”

Who would dare answer him?

Shen Zechuan closed the leather sack and opened another box in the parcel. As expected, it held loose tea leaves. He stood for a moment and let out a soft sigh; he understood Xiao Chiye perfectly.

To others, cows’ milk was the same everywhere. But to Xiao Chiye, what came from Libei was unique, and could never be replaced by anything else. He set aside his own portion, and despite knowing it wouldn’t keep, he still wanted to send it to Shen Zechuan. What if it was somehow delivered on time and still drinkable? They ought to eat and drink all delicious things together.

That was what Xiao Chiye had been thinking; other people might not understand, but Shen Zechuan knew it very well.

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Chapter 137:
Letter Reading

SHEN ZECHUAN sat down to write a letter in the main room as Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng took their leave.

Fei Sheng was itching to smoke his pipe, but he didn't dare, even in the fresh air of the veranda; he worried he would reek of tobacco if Shen Zechuan called for him later. He lingered for a moment. When he saw Qiao Tianya had stopped as well, Fei Sheng guessed what he wanted to ask.

"Something on your mind, huh?" Fei Sheng took a few steps and leaned against the railing. "First, tell me: What kind of relationship do you have with that Unpolished Jade?"

"We've met, but we're not close," Qiao Tianya answered casually.

But the more Qiao Tianya tried to make light of the matter, the more suspicious Fei Sheng grew. "Yao Wenyu isn't among the ranks of court officials; he's a civilian who spends most of his year traveling. Even the Helian Marquis finds it difficult to meet him. How did you encounter him?"

Too lightly, Qiao Tianya said, "Fate, I suppose. I didn't expect it myself. Isn't that why I told you to ask around for me?"

As Fei Sheng could get no details out of him, he gave up probing and reported, "Before Secretariat Elder Hai's demise, he wanted Yao Wenyu to leave Qudu and return to Jincheng, the Yao Clan's hometown. There are students of Grand Preceptor Yao there who could look after him on behalf of the secretariat elder. But Yao Wenyu didn't go."

Qiao Tianya uttered an "Oh" and stood perfectly still under the eaves, watching the rain fall.

"Yao Wenyu probably realized Secretariat Elder Hai asked him to leave because he'd already made up his mind to die," Fei Sheng continued. "He got in the carriage and circled around town before returning to the manor to wait for Secretariat Elder Hai to return from court. Instead, he got the news of Secretariat Elder Hai's death."

Droplets of rain dampened the toes of Qiao Tianya's boots as he watched the mist rise in the courtyard. His gaze dropped to a puddle, and he regarded his own reflection.

Fei Sheng paused for a moment, only continuing when Qiao Tianya's expression stayed firmly unreadable. "During Secretariat Elder Hai's funeral, tens of thousands of people came to pay their respects. Yao Wenyu was his only official student, and he conducted the funeral for the secretariat elder as a son would for his own father. A few days later, when the students from the Imperial College rioted, all of Yao Wenyu's books were torn up. If not for Kong Qiu hiding him in time, he may very well have ended up ripped to shreds by the students himself. But ever since the revelation of the emperor's daughter, he seems to have vanished into thin air. My informers in Qudu could find no trace of him."

Qiao Tianya looked up at him. "Vanished?"

"Just so." Fei Sheng lifted a hand from the banister and drew a circle in the air. "When I escaped Qudu with you, I lost contact with my informants; I only re-established correspondence a short while ago. By then, Yao Wenyu had already disappeared. The Embroidered Uniform Guard knows Qudu like the back of their hand. If my men say he disappeared, he's more likely dead."

"Impossible." Qiao Tianya refuted it immediately. "If Kong Qiu still hopes to revive the moderates, Yao Wenyu is a key figure. Whether for official or personal reasons, Kong Qiu would never let him die."

Fei Sheng watched Qiao Tianya, waiting for him to finish. Then he said, "It's not just a wild guess. Hear me out. Initially, he was merely missing. Kong Qiu and Cen Yu both looked for him, to no avail. He was last seen on Mount Bodhi, where Hai Liangyi was buried. When my men went up to investigate, they found an abandoned carriage and assumed he'd been kidnapped. But if it was an ordinary kidnapping, the perpetrators would approach Kong Qiu to negotiate a ransom, or at the very least name the conditions for Yao Wenyu's release. That's the only way he could be useful as a hostage. But Kong Qiu heard nothing at all. Not even the Yao Clan back in Jincheng received any news of him."

Qiao Tianya frowned. “If the Imperial College hadn’t rioted, Yao Wenyu would have almost certainly become the new star of the moderates. But the Yao Clan’s name was dragged through the mud during the student riots. He no longer has the credibility to lead all the students in the land. He ought to have been a useless pawn in the eyes of Qudu. If he’s dead, someone must have had a reason to kill him. But I can’t see any need.”

Fei Sheng turned to face him. “Exactly! He holds no official position or title, but he’s still the sole lawful grandson of the Yao Clan. Killing him would be more trouble than it’s worth. I don’t understand it myself.”

At that moment, Shen Zechuan called out to them; Qiao Tianya lifted the hanging screen and disappeared inside. He did not broach the subject again.

Cautious as he was, Luo Mu didn’t bring anything up to Cai Yu directly. Instead, he humored his concubine and allowed her to accompany him to his study. His private correspondence, half-heartedly hidden, was almost instantly copied down by Concubine Cai’s maidservant and surreptitiously delivered into Cai Yu’s hands.

Upon seeing those letters, Cai Yu flew into a rage. He summoned Luo Mu to his residence and castigated him until he was blue in the face.

“I thought you were an honest man—that’s why I was willing to marry my sister to you. Have I ever failed to bail you out when you were in a tight spot? I treated you like a brother, yet you were scheming behind my back! Luo Mengzheng, look at yourself. If it weren’t for me, you’d never have gotten anywhere! You think you’re some big shot?!”

Cai Yu was crude and uneducated, used to mixing with the lowest stratum of society. His curses brought Luo Mu to his knees before the table as he apologized. “You treat me so well, Brother; how could I repay your kindness with enmity? These private letters all came to me anonymously. I have no idea who sent them! I’ve been so nervous and afraid, tossing and turning at night and spending my days in a stupor, trying to find an opportunity to bring this up with you, Brother.”

Enraged, Cai Yu tossed the letters onto the desk and pointed at Luo Mu. “What *opportunity* was there to find? You and I are just a courtyard apart. Have you been crippled? Is that why you can’t walk over here? If I hadn’t found out about this now, you would be in bed with them tomorrow!”

Cai Yu was so furious it was giving him heartburn. He stood up and took a few steps, smoothing his hand over his chest before continuing. “You’re a real piece of shit, Luo Mengzheng! And here I was wondering why there were so many people cursing me all of a sudden. Turns out you were all trying to stab me in the back! Shameless, filthy trash! Back when I made my name, you were drinking milk from your mother’s tit! How much money have I spent supporting you, yet you turn around and bite the hand that feeds you! Why? Got greedy after seeing how much we’re making from the grain business? Bah! You think any of you lot are worth a damn in this business? You think you can handle it?!”

Luo Mu was seized with terror. He moved to speak, but Cai Yu bellowed, “Stay on your knees! I show you due respect outside these walls and do what I can to prop you up, yet you take it for granted and fraternize with these ingrates the moment I turn my back. I’m telling you, if not for my sister’s love for you, you wouldn’t walk out this door alive today!”

Sweat was pouring from Luo Mu like rain. He kept his head lowered and said nothing.

Cai Yu stood, sneering down at Luo Mu’s sweat-soaked back. He had spent his younger years making a living on a knife’s edge, and now that he was old, he’d finally settled down. There wasn’t a single person who didn’t respectfully address him as *Elder Cai* when he showed his face. All major and minor bandits of Zhongbo accorded him respect; not even Lei Changming, whom he had despised to the core, had dared put a toe out of line with him.

Only after Luo Mu knelt for some time did Cai Yu’s anger begin to fade. In his eyes, Luo Mu was a spineless man. If he had dared to keep those letters squirreled away for so long without doing anything, it was surely because he had been instigated to join this folly by the other party.

Whoever it was, they were devious, trying to work their plot through the people closest to him.

At this thought, Cai Yu's heart, which had been fluttering with trepidation, burned with hateful anger. He had always seen himself as a generous man. Though it was true he'd taken a large cut of the profits from the grain trade, he always set something aside for those under him so they wouldn't starve. These people didn't know the meaning of gratitude.

"Since they treat me with such heartlessness, I have no choice but to reciprocate in kind." Cai Yu sat beside the window where the light seeped through. He said ominously, "Those insatiable, greedy upstarts are garter snakes trying to devour an elephant. I'll catch a few and make an example of them as a warning. I may be old, but I'm not so decrepit that I'll sit back and let these bastards take advantage."

While Cai Yu was making a public show of dealing with the minor gangs, Shen Zechuan's cold was gradually improving. Fei Sheng had been efficient in his record-keeping: Not only had he documented all the prices of goods in Chazhou, he sent someone to Fanzhou to do the same.

Shen Zechuan didn't spread the news that Cizhou was getting into the grain trade. Within the first few days of their residence in the city, he simply sent Kong Ling around Chazhou to buy up imported goods, as though they had made the trip merely to conduct a bit of trade. Whenever someone came by to inquire about the purpose of their visit, Kong Ling's reply was equivocating. After a few days of his dull responses, far fewer people came to pry.

Kong Ling followed Shen Zechuan to the shops in Chazhou owned by the Xi Clan, which mainly dealt with rouge, medicinal herbs, and foreign goods smuggled from abroad.

"Starving refugees swarm outside the gates, while the city remains peaceful and prosperous. In good times and troubled ones, the ones who suffer will always be the common people." Kong Ling picked up a handful of medicinal herbs, took a sniff, and said approvingly, "This is quality stuff."

“Xi Hongxuan had a businessman’s instincts.” Shen Zechuan glanced around the shop. “Most people wouldn’t dare open a shop like this here for fear of robbery or bankruptcy. Within the last few years, the people of Zhongbo could scarcely afford a bowl of rice porridge. Who would’ve thought the powerful men in this city would spend more extravagantly than the merchants of Juexi? A shop like this is just what they need.”

“Money makes the mare go,” Kong Ling lamented.

In speaking of Xi Hongxuan’s businesses, Shen Zechuan was divulging information about his own finances. Kong Ling understood that this was a mark of Shen Zechuan’s trust—acknowledgment for his support in Cizhou. Kong Ling felt his chest tighten. He had been far too impulsive that day. Modesty was a virtue; flaunting his intelligence before a brilliant master had not been a wise move.

Kong Ling carefully did not reply, so Shen Zechuan dropped the subject. He looked through the account books for a while and asked the shopkeepers for news from Juexi. When the shopkeepers presented him with some trinkets as a tribute of respect, Shen Zechuan rejected items like jadeware, accepting only a fan that caught his eye. He had gotten accustomed to the fan Xiao Chiye had gifted him before it was stained, and this new one didn’t feel quite right in his hand. For now, he would make do—but he was counting on Xiao Chiye to not forget his promise when he returned.

As the rain finally ceased in Chazhou, it had just begun to fall in Libei. The weather in Zhongbo was still warm at the tail end of summer, but in Libei, the air was starting to cool. The winds picked up in the seventh month, and once the rainy season ended, the days would get colder.

Xiao Chiye had been in a foul mood since receiving Xiao Fangxu’s letter. He had remained at Third Sand Camp but had expanded the range of his patrols to overlap with the ones from Border Camp, keeping watch over both camps and guarding all fronts.

Wu Ziyu had initially planned to go north three days hence to deliver the battle steeds, but had delayed his departure indefinitely. He couldn’t set

out on his own; he had to follow Xiao Chiye's orders. Xiao Fangxu's letter had officially made Xiao Chiye the commanding general overseeing equipment and supplies. Xiao Chiye had no say in where he went and had to heed the orders of the other generals who required resupply all over Libei.

Xiao Chiye stepped down from the fortress walls and walked to his tent through the rain. The sky was beginning to darken, and the mess cook was scraping a pot as he hollered out the call for mealtime. The Libei Armored Cavalry and the Imperial Army ate apart, squatting with their backs to each other, as if separated by an invisible wall.

In the case of the Libei Armored Cavalry, they'd tasted one defeat after another and couldn't get over the humiliation of their repeated losses. Meanwhile, the Imperial Army had never been a model of decorum; everyone was used to cracking jokes and horsing around. They had few rules to follow once they stripped off their armor, and were a playful bunch who loved their fun, something the Libei Armored Cavalry looked down upon.

Xiao Chiye accepted a handkerchief from Chen Yang and wiped sweat from his face. The flaps of his tent were wide open, and the hanging screens were raised to try to catch a breeze.

Before Xiao Chiye could take a seat, Gu Jin stepped inside with a bundle in his arms. "Master, a letter from Gongzi."

He took it and waved a hand, gesturing for them to leave. Xiao Chiye brewed himself tea and drank a cup as he unwrapped the bundle, revealing a neatly folded stack of clothes and a bulging oilskin bag. He paid no attention to the clothing; he opened the bag.

Inside were only two items: a handful of orange jasmine, its flowers withered and flattened by the journey, and a letter, slightly damp after being wrapped for so long. When Xiao Chiye picked it up, he could still smell the scent of the jasmine on it. He finished the tea in one gulp, then unfolded the paper.

The letter was short. Xiao Chiye had finished reading it by the time he swallowed his tea. He turned his head toward the entrance of the tent,

where Chen Yang and Gu Jin still stood, and said calmly, “Lower the hanging screens. I’m cold.”

Gu Jin wanted to ask: *Weren’t you sweating just a moment ago?* But Chen Yang had already removed the hooks and let the screens down.

The moment he was shielded from view, Xiao Chiye read the letter again, and then again. Finally, he rubbed at his ear, picked up the stack of clothing, and collapsed heavily onto his cot. He held up the letter, letting his eyes linger on each word:

It’s been too many days since we parted. I know you must miss me, so I’ve sent a small token to offer you comfort. Touch it as if you touched me.

Xiao Chiye stared at that line of text and read it once more. *Touch it as if you touched me.*

His throat felt dry, but laughter bubbled up inexplicably, and his gaze grew fierce. Scrawled at the very bottom, in a light and hasty hand, were the words:

A cold pillow makes for difficult nights. When will you return to our bed? A good night’s sleep is only possible with me in your arms.

Xiao Chiye let the letter fall from his fingers and gazed up at the ceiling. A moment later, he rolled over and buried his face in the pillow. It was as if Shen Zechuan was lying beside him, nibbling at his ear and whispering languidly, *A good night’s sleep is only possible with me in your arms.…*

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Chapter 138:
Strategist

SHEN ZECHUAN woke with the sun. After breakfast, he took the carriage back to the cosmetics shop with Kong Ling. Business continued as usual in the front hall, while in the back courtyard, Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng stood guard, and the Embroidered Uniform Guard kept careful watch both inside and outside the premises.

Half an hour later, Luo Mu's sedan arrived. He was dressed casually in a brick-red robe with wide sleeves and a slanted collar. The shopkeeper at the front desk was a sharp man; noting that the servants behind Luo Mu were unfamiliar, he raised his voice. "It's already hot out; we can't let our guests stand outside in the sun. Men, show these fellows inside for some tea."

The servants exchanged a glance. Luo Mu couldn't run from them here; they followed the shop assistant into another room and took a seat. Still, they insisted on raising the curtains to keep an eye on the entrance.

The shopkeeper walked beside Luo Mu and offered a handkerchief. Luo Mu wiped his hands as usual and strolled around the shop, looking at the goods on the shelves. The shopkeeper smiled. "The last time Your Excellency came by, we didn't have everything in stock. We prepared in advance this time. Some new jade pieces and trinkets have just arrived from the east as well; they're all in the back. This way, please!"

Luo Mu cast a hesitant glance at his servants.

"It's just across the courtyard; it won't take up too much of Your Excellency's time," the shopkeeper urged. "These are rare goods. You'll be much more comfortable taking your time browsing in the back."

Luo Mu reluctantly nodded and followed the shopkeeper to the courtyard at the back of the shop.

Qiao Tianya drew the curtain aside for Luo Mu, who murmured his thanks and lowered his head to enter. He first bowed to Shen Zechuan, then

looked toward Kong Ling. Only upon seeing that both their expressions were relaxed did he take his seat.

Noting that Luo Mu was dressed as a diligent scholar today, Shen Zechuan presumed he had chosen his clothes and shoes for this errand with care. Although he sat ramrod straight, he couldn't keep from glancing subconsciously at Kong Ling from time to time as they spoke, and the moment Kong Ling opened his mouth, Luo Mu's eyes fixed attentively upon him.

"Cai Yu has focused his attention on squashing the smaller gangs in the last few days," Luo Mu explained, "but he knows where to draw the line. He understands the principle of interdependence. These bandits share a common lot: If one falls, the others will follow. He fears he will end up isolated if he goes too far. At the same time as he's striking at the smaller gangs he thinks are opposing him, he's trying to win over the remaining up-and-comers by offering them cheap grain." Remembering that Shen Zechuan was there, Luo Mu exercised restraint and glanced away from Kong Ling. "He plans to give those gangs who haven't stirred up trouble the opportunity to sell grain at a discount and make a quick return."

"What is he offering them?" Kong Ling asked.

"One tael of silver for five dou of rice," Luo Mu answered.

Kong Ling smiled. "That's hardly a low price. His so-called discount merely means he makes a tiny bit less profit than others out there. Cai Yu used to be generous about helping the needy, considering himself above money and worldly possessions. He's gotten miserly in his old age."

At this price, the grain could hardly be called cheap; indeed, it was still exorbitantly expensive. Chazhou's going rate for rice was one tael of silver for two dou of rice, while in Qudu, one tael of silver purchased twenty times as much. Cai Yu was making money hand over fist while driving the common folk to starvation. Even to win over his adversaries, he had only lowered the price this tiny bit. The man was genuinely obsessed with wealth—he couldn't bear to undercut his own profits.

Shen Zechuan skimmed the foam in his tea. "Cai Yu is in a fix too; he can't back down. Everyone inside and outside the city is complaining about

the high price of grain. If he lowers the price drastically for the sake of some minor bandits, the common folk will hate him even more than they do now. He doesn't dare."

"It's not just Chazhou. Public wrath is growing even in Fanzhou." Luo Mu was well-acquainted with Cai Yu's business dealings. "At the beginning of this year, the Yan Clan severed their connection with Lei Changming, and Yan Heru stopped sponsoring the bandits from Mount Luo, though no one knows why. This is one of the reasons Lei Changming set his sights on Cizhou and its granary—they couldn't afford to buy Cai Yu's grains."

"Let Cai Yu sell for a few days." Shen Zechuan turned over his folding fan and tapped it lightly against the table. "It doesn't matter if it's one tael for two dou or one tael for five dou; neither the common folk nor the minor bandits can afford it. Cai Yu is gritting his teeth to show such kindness because he's hoping these bandits will knuckle under. But he's too arrogant by far—it's bound to backfire."

"It's not just the common folk," Kong Ling lamented. "Even government officials can't afford to buy grain at these prices on the monthly salary issued by the imperial court. On our way here, we saw people selling themselves like cattle outside Chazhou—parents are selling all their children just for a chance at survival."

"People aren't worth much nowadays; even if they sell the children, no one's paying more than a handful of coppers." Luo Mu had long heard of this practice. "Look at the situation we're in—who in Zhongbo will pay just to have another mouth to feed? Only the brothels in Fanzhou are willing to take them, and even there, a child from a good family sold into the bottom class wouldn't even be worth a dou of rice."

Shen Zechuan was unfamiliar with the situation in Fanzhou. "If Fanzhou can't even feed its own people, where is it getting money to operate brothels?"

"They're run by bandits, too—these specifically deal in the flesh trade and work with the bandits from Mount Luo and Dengzhou," Luo Mu

answered. “The prostitutes are dirt cheap, and whatever tiny bit they make is swallowed by the madams.”

“But they have to feed the people they buy, right?” Kong Ling asked, perplexed. “Do they buy grain from Cai Yu too?”

Luo Mu shook his head. “Humans are worth less than dogs in Fanzhou. They’re fed swill and weeds. If a few starve to death, the bandits can buy more. The cost is negligible—they won’t suffer a loss either way.”

Kong Ling sat in a daze, a look of anguish coming over his face. “To think Zhongbo has been reduced to this. If the imperial court had taken action earlier, how could the situation have deteriorated so utterly? I said many years back that Hua Siqian and…”

Shen Wei’s name lodged in his throat.

Knowing Kong Ling, Luo Mu feared he would say something to upset Shen Zechuan; he quickly changed the subject. “In the vice commander’s opinion, what should we do next?”

In lieu of answering, Shen Zechuan said, “If Shen Wei hadn’t fled before the enemy, Zhongbo wouldn’t have suffered such a devastating loss. I hold Mister Chengfeng in the highest esteem for his concern for the common people. There’s no need to shy away from this subject.”

Shen Zechuan spoke with such sincerity that Luo Mu was embarrassed instead. Kong Ling felt his heart sink. Recently, he had been doing his best to avoid Shen Zechuan despite their proximity on this mission. Kong Ling was a clever man. He was willing to work for Zhou Gui because he understood Zhou Gui’s character, but he still felt wary around Shen Zechuan. Following Shen Zechuan, he thought, was ultimately a dangerous move. Masters who were difficult to read were the hardest to serve. The calmer the vice commander appeared on the surface, the more cautiously Kong Ling had to tread, lest one misstep land him in a bottomless abyss.

Kong Ling didn’t mind working with Shen Zechuan, but was unwilling to devote himself to him the way he had Zhou Gui. Shen Zechuan had been dropping hints the entire trip, yet Kong Ling had feigned ignorance at every turn. Now, seeing that Shen Zechuan was not only

unoffended, but had even excused his awkward slip of the tongue, he was filled with increasing trepidation.

Noting the shift in Kong Ling's expression, Shen Zechuan gently turned over his fan and paused for a moment before speaking. "Keep the fact that Cizhou is here to sell grain quiet for a few more days. Wait until the bandits are fed up with Cai Yu pushing them around and decide to prioritize their own interests—only then will we release the news. At that point, don't bring our grain wagons into the city. We'll set up porridge tents right outside of the walls and tell the refugees Cizhou is here to sell grain at a fair price."

"What if they have no money?" Luo Mu probed tentatively.

Shen Zechuan smiled. "Are these people not Chazhou's future garrison troops and the cultivators of your farmlands? The common people may be poor, but Your Excellency has amassed quite a sum yourself with Cai Yu's help. What's more, once Cai Yu is out of the picture, a large part of his assets will fall into Your Excellency's hands. Use that silver to do business with Cizhou in exchange for winning the hearts of the people, and many of Your Excellency's future problems will be solved. That said, I must remind you that Cizhou is here to do business, not to tighten its own belt to offer charity to others."

Beads of sweat sprang up on Luo Mu's forehead. He dabbed his brow with a handkerchief and nodded. "But of course, of course."

Shen Zechuan returned to his manor in Chazhou without Kong Ling. Qiao Tianya sat in the driver's seat with his hands clasped behind his head, tilting the brim of his bamboo hat forward. From the other side of the curtain, he asked, "Master, you don't want him anymore?"

Wilting in the heat, Shen Zechuan closed his eyes to rest within the stuffy interior of the carriage. He listened to the peddlers hawking their wares along the street for a moment before answering. "I've tried both carrot and stick, but he's determined to turn me down."

Speaking around the fresh stalk of grass sticking out of his mouth, Qiao Tianya said, "That's to be expected. He's hidden his abilities in front

of you on more than one occasion because he's afraid of being coerced. After completing his education, he didn't follow in Zhou Gui and Luo Mu's footsteps and join the ranks of the civil officials. He wants to be a civilian. Men like him are natural-born strategists. His point of pride is his ability to choose his own path."

Shen Zechuan opened his eyes a crack. "It's not as if he's my only option."

It wasn't that he wished to force Kong Ling into serving him, but the fact was, Shen Zechuan genuinely lacked manpower. At first, he had thought Kong Ling and Zhou Gui were the best arrangement. Put together, the pair of them could ensure the peace and stability of Cizhou at the very least, and perhaps a whole region. But now, Shen Zechuan needed someone at his side who could advise and plan. He no longer lacked a pair of eyes or a pair of hands, but a strategist who could assist him in devising long-term tactics.

Kong Ling had a reputation in Zhongbo as a man of considerable talent, and had been fellow students with both Zhou Gui and Luo Mu. Based on these relationships alone, he could assist Shen Zechuan with many issues in both prefectures. For instance, he had been able to see Luo Mu directly upon arriving in Chazhou by simply delivering a visitation card. He also possessed the social connections he had built up among the Dunzhou Garrison Troops from his time as Tantai Long's advisor. As long as those connections remained alive, they could be of use in the future. Shen Zechuan hadn't initially thought highly of Kong Ling. When Lei Jingzhe had tried to hoodwink him, Kong Ling had been too easily deceived. Kong Ling's shout outside Cizhou's city walls was what made Shen Zechuan take note of him again. But it was not until Kong Ling had so swiftly agreed to Shen Zechuan's proposal before they set off for Chazhou that Shen Zechuan had fully set his mind on taking Kong Ling into his employ.

However, it seemed Kong Ling had no intention of changing masters.

For one thing, Shen Zechuan was too young. Not only was he burdened with a difficult past, growing up under stigma and hardship, he had also studied under Qi Huilian. Qi Huilian had seen many ups and

downs in Qudu, and had served as the head of the Eastern Palace for many years. What kind of student would such a teacher produce? Qi Huilian was meant to raise an emperor, a point Kong Ling didn't dare dwell upon. Most importantly, Kong Ling feared Shen Zechuan; he couldn't bring himself to trust him. In the eyes of Kong Ling, Shen Zechuan knew he was a cold-hearted man who would cast aside personal relationships in a heartbeat. Had Zhou Gui been the negotiator here today, he would never have spoken such pointed words to Luo Mu.

Vexed, Shen Zechuan raised his head to watch the curtain of the carriage sway amid the jolts and bumps of the road. Sunlight flickered through the gaps, spilling onto his knees and melting into the white of his robe.

Since the day of Qi Huilian's death, Shen Zechuan had worn only white in mourning. He had never asked Qiao Tianya what Han Cheng did with his teacher's body after he left Qudu. His anguished wails that night were known only to Xiao Chiye. But the names of Xue Xiuzhuo, Han Cheng, and the empress dowager were seared into Shen Zechuan's heart, along with his last sight of the city walls of Qudu, stained red in the pouring rain.

He had to stand firm. He needed a strategist.

A voice inside him murmured: *A strategist who can stand up to Xue Xiuzhuo as his equal.*

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Chapter 139:
The Price of Grain

KNOWING HE HAD disappointed Shen Zechuan with his rebuff, Kong Ling avoided him over the next several days. Instead, he focused his attention on inspecting the goods in the Xi Clan's shops, too busy even to pause for a midday meal. Shen Zechuan behaved as he always had and continued to greet him as Mister Chengfeng whenever they crossed paths. Yet far from putting Kong Ling at ease, this only increased his apprehension, and he deferred to Shen Zechuan in every particular.

Just as they had predicted, Cai Yu's discounted grain did not impress the minor bandits. With Luo Mu playing the middleman and pulling strings, several different parties gradually converged, united in their discontent toward Cai Yu.

In recent years, Cai Yu's tastes had run toward extravagance. When he celebrated his birthday, he always received rare and valuable gifts, and the value of these gifts directly impacted how he treated the giver over the next year. This had stirred up a great deal of unhappiness among many in private. At the same time, news that Cai Yu was selling grain for cheap swiftly spread outside the city walls. The rumored price dropped lower and lower with each telling, and the starving commoners outside the city grew more and more outraged.

Cai Yu had once considered himself a respected elder of Chazhou, yet now he barred the city gates and ignored the plight of the people. Shen Zechuan was right—it wasn't that he didn't understand the corner he was in, but that he had no way to back down.

The grain in Chazhou was presently supplied by Hezhou, and thus bankrolled by the Yan Clan. For their part in this, the Yan clan expected a certain monetary return; if it didn't come out of the profits from selling the grain, it would have to come from Cai Yu's own pockets. By lowering the price, he would only disadvantage himself—and as he was unwilling to

stomach such a loss, he could only push ahead. In the meantime, he had sent several private letters to Hezhou to sound them out.

This was the moment Shen Zechuan had been waiting for.

Cai Yu could never have imagined that overnight, all of Chazhou would be talking about the price of grain.

"Where did all these people come from?" Cai Yu summoned his maidservant to help him dress as he snapped at his trusted aide. "Why didn't I hear so much as a whisper about Cizhou's grain wagons entering our territory?!"

"They took the public road disguised as merchants and kept the news of their arrival quiet; word never reached us," his aide replied.

Cai Yu glowered as he pulled on his boots and stepped forward. "I thought it was strange when Kong Ling entered the city. What business could Cizhou possibly have here? Turns out they've come to steal ours! They prepared all this just to challenge me! What are they saying?"

The aide picked up the back hem of Cai Yu's robe. "I sent someone to make inquiries this morning. The price Cizhou's merchants are offering outside the city is one tael for seven dou of rice."

On hearing this, Cai Yu sneered. "I thought they were here to play bodhisattva and save the people, but they're here to profit off their misfortune, same as anyone. Has there been any reply from Hezhou?"

The aide calculated the days and answered, "The letter won't have made it there yet."

Cai Yu stood by the door and contemplated in silence. Outside in the courtyard, the stream gurgled and the caged birds hanging under the covered walkway chirped, clear and melodious. He had spent a vast sum of money on this estate, intending to pass it down to his children. He had several sons waiting to take over the family business from their old man, and more than a thousand people in his family and under his employment who depended on his sale of grain. He couldn't afford to lose this business.

“One tael for seven dou,” Cai Yu muttered. “One tael for seven dou. Trying to steal my business with prices like that—isn’t Cizhou looking down on me a bit too much? Since they’ve lowered their price, we’ll go even lower. Go tell our shops I’m reducing the price to one tael for eight dou of rice, flour, or beans out of sympathy for the commoners inside and outside the city.”

The aide hesitated. “Young Master Yan has yet to reply. If—”

“Lower it.” Cai Yu’s expression was grave. “The young master still calls me Pa. If we can’t make up what we owe them, I’ll thicken my skin and go to Hezhou to beg a favor. With the young master at the head of the Yan Clan, no one will dare give me attitude! Cizhou thinks they can come here and menace us in our own city; if we don’t make them think twice, there’ll be more trouble in the future.”

The instant Cai Yu’s aide stepped out of the manor, Shen Zechuan knew everything that’d been said.

Fei Sheng’s network was everywhere. When he whispered the contents of Cai Yu’s conversation to Shen Zechuan, Shen Zechuan was handing out porridge outside the city.

The weather was bright and clear. Shen Zechuan had left the city at daybreak and given out free porridge to the poor and needy from early morning until late afternoon, standing the whole time. The sun was beating down, so hot the muddy ground dried and cracked. As the sun climbed in the sky, all the refugees sought shelter under the trees.

Shen Zechuan nodded slightly after hearing Fei Sheng out, wiping his hands with a handkerchief. “He’s taken the bait; he won’t escape now. Go to Luo Mu; tell him to make sure the smaller gangs hold their ground. We can push Cai Yu’s price down even further.”

Fei Sheng knew precisely what Shen Zechuan intended, but he had to play the fool before him. He inquired like a keen student, “Master, are we going to reduce our prices too? We can’t let Cai Yu get his way.”

Shen Zechuan tossed the handkerchief to Qiao Tianya. “Naturally. We’ll wait for nightfall before we lower our price.”

After all, he had other matters to attend to during the day.

A white-robed young master with a white jade earring and only a handful of attendants had suddenly appeared outside the city of Chazhou. He stayed at the porridge booth from morning to evening personally distributing porridge to the people. Word traveled easily among the refugees who came to get their bowls; they learned that this rice from Cizhou was initially meant to be sold in Chazhou, but Cai Yu refused to let the merchants into the city. The party had found the hungry commoners outside the city too pitiable, and decided to hand out their wares to them instead.

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Shen Zechuan's attitude was polite and amiable, and he spoke with humble courtesy. Best of all, he was handsome. If any households came to the porridge booth with orphans and widows, or with the infirm, he not only gave them food but even sent a physician to examine them, bearing the consultation fees and cost of the medicine himself. Within two hours of the booth's opening, word had spread, and the refugees who had come after hearing of him had converged into a flock. Whenever someone asked the young master's name, Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng would answer with "Lord Zhou's advisor" or "Mister Chengfeng's colleague."

Even so, Shen Zechuan's youth and distinguished air sent speculation swirling through the city. None of the common folk knew who this mysterious gentleman was, which made him all the more fascinating.

Cai Yu was restless with anxiety as he waited at home until the wee hours of the morning, not daring to close his eyes for even a moment. When he heard footsteps outside, he sprang up to let in his trusted aide, asking almost before he'd stepped through the door, "How is it? Is there an update on Kong Ling's end?"

The aide had been running to and fro all day. Though he had taken a sedan, he was ready to collapse from exhaustion, and his back was drenched in sweat. He wiped his brow with his sleeves and gasped for breath as he answered, "Yes, they went down! As my lord predicted, Cizhou has also lowered their price!"

"How much?" Cai Yu asked anxiously.

"One tael for nine dou of rice," the aide replied.

Cai Yu was calm; this was within his expectations. He paced as he thought aloud. "We offered one additional dou per tael, and they followed suit. They're following our lead; they're not confident in their pricing either."

The aide trailed behind Cai Yu. "My lord, then should we keep lowering the price? If we go any lower, it's going to reach ten dou—one dan—per tael!"

From two dou to ten… Cai Yu was already dreading the consequences he would face in Hezhou after this disaster. But he was in too deep; he could only trudge on. He clenched his jaw. “Lower! One dan per tael!”

When the news reached Luo Mu in his residence, he turned to Kong Ling. “If Cai Yu continues to lower the price, it’ll be difficult for him to raise it again later. He’s fallen for your ploy—hook, line, and sinker.”

Kong Ling peered out the window and confirmed there was no one else around before speaking. “It’s all thanks to the vice commander’s foresight.”

Luo Mu sighed. “Had I been his target, I would’ve been deceived too. How could Cai Yu know Cizhou’s been aiming for Qudu’s price this whole time? This is a lucrative business. Every increase of one dou of grain per tael is a loss of real silver.”

“Riches can’t be taken to the grave; how much longer can he profit off of the misfortunes of Zhongbo? Don’t be blinded by money! If Cai Yu had any sense, he would’ve shown some restraint this year. Six years ago, Cizhou hadn’t a leg to stand on, but we’ve been rebuilding our strength these last few years. The decision to source grain for Libei’s armored cavalry from Cizhou last year was made by Secretariat Elder Hai and Marquis Xiao. Think—back then, Qudu already knew Cizhou could bear this burden. Once Cizhou is revitalized, those with ambition from other prefectures will bear witness to our successes and be inspired to action. When the time comes for these places to re-cultivate their fields, the price of grain in Zhongbo is sure to fall. This golden goose could never last forever; the only question was who would be the one to strangle it.” Kong Ling paused. “Both the time and place are right. The vice commander means to make a killing here in Zhongbo.”

Seeing that Kong Ling was somewhat distracted, Luo Mu ventured, “I can see the vice commander has intentions of taking you on, yet you willfully turn a blind eye to it. Chengfeng, could it be that even the vice commander cannot compare to Zhou Gui?”

Gazing at the shadows of the tree beyond the window, Kong Ling thought for a long time before replying. “My abilities are mediocre. I can advise Zhou Gui because the prefect of Cizhou is all he wishes to be in this lifetime. Keeping the peace in one small corner of the world is easy; even someone of my caliber can do it. But stabilizing our great land a thousand miles across requires the talent of a pillar of the state. Fish may be confined to ponds, but dragons look toward the sky—the vice commander is no mere fish. I dare not be so presumptuous as to claim a connection with such a man.”

Luo Mu was struck dumb.

Inside or outside Chazhou, no one slept well that night. Cai Yu drank cup after cup of strong tea, afraid to shut his eyes lest the other side surreptitiously lower the price again the moment he lay down. He had never been a man of great business acumen and had relied on his status as a bandit to serve as the face of the Yan Clan in Chazhou. Now he was a bundle of nerves, driven to a state of constant anxiety.

Hours went by without news from the people from Cizhou. Dawn came and went, and the porridge booth outside the city was still operating. Cai Yu heard more than a thousand people had gathered outside the city. Still, he was confident that what he had in his hands was real fighting power, while those milling outside the walls were a motley crew. Even if they banded together, they wouldn’t present much of a threat.

When noon came with no news, Cai Yu decided to take a nap, and lay down without changing his clothes. Yet he had just shut his eyes when he heard the aide come in. He bolted up and let a maidservant support him by the arm on his way out.

The moment he saw the aide’s expression, his heart sank. “How much did they lower it?”

“My lord, this time it’s madness!” the aide reported, wringing his hands. “They’ve dropped it to one dan and three dou of grain per tael of silver. The people who were still on the fence yesterday are making their

way out of the city now. They are all heading for Cizhou's wagons to buy grain!"

Cai Yu felt a chill crawl up his spine. "That low?!"

"It's already nearing the price of grain in Juexi," the aide replied. "If it goes any lower, we'll have to forfeit all our profits so far this year just to repay Hezhou!"

Cai Yu gripped the man and blurted in disbelief, "Didn't Cizhou just send provisions to Libei? Now that Libei's rebelled, they'll expect to get all their provisions from Cizhou in the future. If Zhou Gui sells all his grain, how does he plan to answer to the Prince of Libei? Can they even make any money at these prices?!"

The aide followed at Cai Yu's heels in a matching state of panic. "Exactly! If they keep lowering the price, it will be no different from selling in Juexi. Wouldn't they be taking a loss? What profit is there for them?"

Cai Yu was getting on in years, and he'd gone all night without sleep; he was so unsteady on his feet that he called a servant to help him to the chair. "They're determined to steal our business." Resentment roiled in him. "How dare they! Gather my men. Tonight, we'll overturn their grain wagons, capture Kong Ling, and slaughter everyone he brought with him! I have ferocious bandits on my side; what do I have to fear from them? That ignorant brat, Zhou Gui—he thinks he has the guts to fight me head-on?!"

The aide slapped his knee. "You're absolutely right, my lord! We should've taken the gloves off long ago instead of playing nice with these people! I'll go right away!"

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Chapter 140:
City Outskirts

CAI YU GATHERED his men with great fanfare inside the city, while outside the walls, the streams of refugees had merged into a sea of people. It took but a single night for the news that someone had set up a tent and was giving out porridge to spread over a three-mile radius. Refugees with sallow faces and ribs pushing from their chests came in droves, packing themselves around Cizhou's porridge tent so tightly not even a drop of water could have trickled through.

Qiao Tianya watched as the people came swarming toward them. When they no longer had enough hands to oversee the queue of people coming to receive porridge, he shot Fei Sheng a look. Fei Sheng backed away and led the men from the Embroidered Uniform Guard to watch the grain wagon, relieving the guards from Cizhou to help with the queue. The Embroidered Uniform Guard were all dressed in black and carried blades at their sides, and their formidable appearance suppressed some of the restlessness of the crowd.

"Master." Qiao Tianya raised a hand to hold back the people pressing in and whispered to Shen Zechuan, "It's getting dark. We've been here for two days and a night; surely that's enough. You can step back now."

Shen Zechuan had just finished chatting with an elderly man who'd come with the refugees. He didn't look back at Qiao Tianya's words, but tucked away the blue handkerchief he had taken out. "There's no harm in staying a little longer."

Qiao Tianya surveyed their surroundings and watched the crowd jostling one another. These were all desperate refugees; he worried a fight would break out, and that someone would make a grab for the grain and hurt Shen Zechuan amid the chaos. "Master, stand back next to the wagon at least; here or there, it's all the same."

Shen Zechuan looked out into the forest beyond the city, bathed in the rosy glow of clouds like shreds of red cotton flowers. The sun was

already sinking below the horizon; it wouldn't be long before the sky turned dark. He had been outside the city since yesterday morning. Now, he looked away from the trees and said, "There's no hurry."

The sky gradually darkened, and the shops along the city streets hung up their lanterns. Chazhou had no taverns or tea houses, but due to the proliferation of human traffickers, there were plenty of brothels hiding in the remote corners of the city. Cai Yu had sent his aide to rally his men and call all the leaders within his own gang to report. These people lived off Cai Yu's money and had no real jobs to earn their keep. Instead, they spent their time bullying the weak and tyrannizing the city, patronizing the brothels and lazing around day in and day out. When they were summoned, they staggered out of the brothels holding up their pants and looking around with bleary eyes. Many were dead drunk. Afraid of offending them, Cai Yu's trusted aide coaxed them along, showering them with flattery just to get them to step out the door.

While the bandits were taking roll call and lining up in ragged formation, Luo Mu and Kong Ling had also started mobilizing their forces.

Kong Ling bowed to the various chiefs of the small gangs Luo Mu had supported in secret. "As you are no doubt aware, Cizhou is here to sell grain. As long as we can weather the night, the price of rice tomorrow will be lower still."

"Talk is cheap," one bandit replied. "How do you expect us to believe you with no proof?"

Kong Ling turned and gestured toward Luo Mu beside him. "Perhaps my words can't be trusted, but surely you can believe the words of Lord Luo?"

Again and again, Luo Mu had lent a hand to these gangs, funding them with a hefty sum of silver in the past two weeks alone. Cai Yu had come down hard on them in the last few days, leaving them too fearful to step out of their alleys during the day. They hadn't been included in the one-tael-for-five-dou deal offered to the other gangs. Cai Yu had driven them

into a corner, and it was only thanks to Luo Mu's financial support that they were still standing. Of course they were willing to believe Luo Mu.

Luo Mu cleared his throat. "At present, all the granaries in the city are controlled by Cai Yu. His prices are too high. Even people like you and me can't afford to eat, let alone the common folks. Cizhou has offered us a good price—close to Qudu's—but what's better is that Cizhou has promised never to inflate the price in the future. I've already signed the agreements with Cizhou; it's all down in black and white."

The chiefs put their heads together to discuss among themselves.

Kong Ling spoke again. "I know everyone here is worried about the Yan Clan. But it's better to make a clean break than prolong the agony. Instead of allowing the Yan Clan to maintain its grip on Chazhou's throat via Cai Yu, why not set you and your brothers here free to make your own decisions? The only reason Cai Yu is willing to lower the price today is because he is threatened by Cizhou. If we cannot rid ourselves of him tonight, grain in Chazhou will return to its original price the moment Cizhou's grain wagons are out of sight."

If Kong Ling wanted these men to work with him, he had to show them what they stood to gain. This was something he knew very well. Cizhou's intended final asking price was one tael of silver for one dan and eight dou of rice, yet Shen Zechuan had neglected to mention this number even once during these past few days of price reductions. They had been waiting for this moment, to use this information to galvanize the people.

Kong Ling paused dramatically before continuing. "According to our vice commander, as long as everyone pitches in to take Cai Yu down, the price of grain will drop again from one tael for one dan and three dou, to one dan and six dou!"

The moment these words were out, the bandit chiefs became feverish with excitement.

The price of grain in Juexi was only one tael for one dan and five dou of rice, yet Cizhou was willing to offer an additional dou for the same price. The impact of such a promise far exceeded that of Cai Yu's small gesture of generosity. It was bigger than just grain—in this moment, the small gangs

saw the possibility of a future for Chazhou. Most importantly, the money for the first batch of grain this autumn wouldn't come out of their own pockets, but those of Luo Mu. After kicking Cai Yu off his throne, Chazhou could also claim the contents of the Cai manor's granaries. With the combination of these two sources of grain, they wouldn't have to worry about getting through winter for the first time in years.

Sounds of assent rose at once, and in no time, spirits were high.

Kong Ling nodded at Luo Mu, then addressed the outspoken chief: "Cai Yu's men are still within the city. Everyone, stay calm for now—we have a plan."

Around midnight, Cai Yu's men marched out of the city gates. These bandits had looted their equipment from the armory that had once belonged to the garrison troops of Chazhou. Although the armor was old, it came complete with swords, sabers, and shields. At a glance, the troop of bandits might have passed for a proper army.

When Cai Yu's aide had sent someone to check on Cizhou's porridge booth that morning, there had been a thousand or so migrants gathered outside the city. But now when the man jogged out for a look, the crowd had swelled so much he couldn't see where it ended. The number of people had doubled at least. Cai Yu only had fifteen hundred men inside the city; the aide had brought a thousand of those with him tonight, yet they seemed somewhat cowed as they gathered at the city gates.

"Why are there suddenly so many people here?" One of the chiefs in the back craned his neck to look over the crowd. "There's no end to them!"

The aide turned, smiling obsequiously back at the bandits. "They're so hungry they can scarcely walk. You call these people? What's important are the grain wagons. You heard my lord—as long as you take them down, he'll split the grain from Cizhou between all the chiefs here."

The chief saw that they were indeed just refugees in rags, with a pathetic number of guards from Cizhou stationed around the edges. "If the big boss has given his word, then we'll do it! See those guards from

Cizhou? Let’s divide up the wagons according to how many heads each of us take. The more guards you kill, the larger your share of the spoils!”

The troop of bandits rubbed their palms together, eager for a fight. They didn’t wait for the aide to give the command before they swarmed out of the gates.

Shen Zechuan had just brought the bowl of porridge to his mouth when he heard the first cries of battle. A swarm of bandits charged down the public road brandishing their blades and slashing indiscriminately at the crowd. Fortunately, the men from Cizhou were guarding the periphery. As the two parties clashed, Fei Sheng shouted toward the refugees, “Robbery! Cai Yu sent his men to steal Cizhou’s grain!”

He shouted at the top of his lungs, but even this wasn’t loud enough to carry over the din. However, the refugees around him were scared out of their wits. They jostled and bumped into one another as they took up the cry, yelling, “Robbery! Cai Yu sent his men to steal the grain!”

At this, one bandit chief was emboldened and roared with ferocious laughter. “We’re here to take this grain, all right! Whoever dares stand in our way will die on our blades! Brothers, charge!”

The Cizhou guards were too few to withstand the wave of onrushing bandits, and the refugees were right behind them. Many were instantly knocked down in the crush, and pained cries rang out as people were trampled underfoot. Seeing their helplessness, a cruel urge rose in the bandits. They yanked the infirm and vulnerable from the crowd and terrorized them, waving their blades in their faces. “We’re not just taking the grain; we’re here to kill!”

The bandits dragged a woman with a babe in her arms down the road by her hair, their gleaming blade frightening her so much that she shook as she wept and pled for her life. But these men were inured to every kind of atrocity; when they saw her wailing, they felt no pity but instead burst out laughing. One lunged forward, swinging his saber toward the child in her arms.

A hand reached out from the crowd and grasped the man’s blade.

Sweeping the hem of his robe back, Qiao Tianya grinned. “Killing is one thing, but why humiliate these people? All this weeping and wailing is making my ears ring. Make quick with that blade and get it over with!”

The bandit struggled in Qiao Tianya’s grip, but the saber didn’t budge. He bellowed, “Ugh! Let go!”

Seeing his face flush with effort, Qiao Tianya took a few steps back, forcing the chief to stagger forward with him.

Shen Zechuan, standing behind his guards, chose this moment to intervene. “Are you done making a fool of that man? Qiao Yueyue, let go and give him his blade back.”

“Of course, no problem,” Qiao Tianya said. “I’ll let go. I’m letting go right now!” He had barely finished his taunt when, with a final tug, he released the man’s blade. The bandit stumbled toward Qiao Tianya, who stepped aside to dodge him, then lifted his foot and delivered a swift kick to the bandit’s ass. The man was sent flying into the crowd, landing directly at Shen Zechuan’s feet.

As he struggled to stand, his eyes followed that white robe upward. Just before they reached Shen Zechuan’s chest, the tip of Avalanche’s sheath pressed down on the crown of the man’s head, preventing him from raising it any further.

In a change from Shen Zechuan’s usual stoic facade, his gaze was sharp and fierce, his tone righteous: “Cizhou is here to provide aid to the common folk of Chazhou. We can’t help it if Cai Yu won’t allow us into the city; must you tear down the porridge tent too? Tear it down, then, if you must. But do not hurt these people.”

His voice was not loud, but it rang clear over the crowd around him. Chazhou had suffered immensely under Cai Yu and the Yan Clan’s inflated grain prices, and the people were overwhelmed with sorrow and indignation. Upon hearing the sobs of the woman whom Qiao Tianya had rescued, several others began to weep as well.

How could this bandit know he’d fallen right into his enemy’s trap? All he remembered was the promise of spoils the other chief had mentioned earlier. Unable to raise his head higher, he braced his hands in the dirt and

said scornfully, “Our big boss lords over Chazhou. If he wants to tear this little tent down or kill these people, you think you can stop him?!”

Shen Zechuan’s grip loosened on the sheath in his hand. “This grain __”

The bandit snatched up a blade that had fallen nearby and lunged upward, slashing at Shen Zechuan’s chest. Qiao Tianya had already moved to intercept him, but the bandit was closer; the blade cut straight toward Shen Zechuan. In the instant before it met flesh, the bandit saw the composure in Shen Zechuan’s eyes, as if he had been waiting for this very moment.

There was a *clang* as Avalanche’s sheath struck the flat of the bandit’s blade, knocking it aside. Drops of crimson splattered Shen Zechuan’s sleeve.

A refugee next to Shen Zechuan cowered on the ground, paralyzed with terror. “They’re killing people!”

Qiao Tianya first thought the blood belonged to someone else—but upon closer inspection, he saw that Shen Zechuan’s left hand was bleeding.

Cries of alarm split the air. Far away over the heads of the crowd, Fei Sheng thundered with all his might, “Who dares harm my master?!”

The Embroidered Uniform Guard drew their blades in synchrony. From the moment Qiao Tianya had stopped the blade, one of the bandit chiefs at the rear of the cluster had recognized they’d encountered a formidable foe. He took a few quiet steps back and commanded, “Do as the big boss said. Cut them down!”

The bandit in front of Shen Zechuan was still surging forward; Qiao Tianya landed a kick in the center of his back, sending the man sprawling onto the ground. Before he could draw his blade to finish him off, several refugees rushed out from behind Shen Zechuan, charging at the fallen bandit with nothing but their fists and feet. The entire crowd was roused to action, their anger cresting like a wave. They stampeded forward, colliding with the bandits without a care for their own lives.

“Cai Yu, open up the stores! Bandits begone! Leave our benefactor be!”

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Chapter 141:
Into the Rain

NEVER IN THEIR WILDEST dreams had the bandits imagined these starving commoners would fight back. The deafening sound of trampling feet was like a thunderstorm, a cacophony of curses and cries that engulfed the bandits like a surge of floodwater. The commoners threw caution to the wind as they shouted amid the chaos, “Bandit scum deserve to die!”

The bandits were no match for so many. Stones and broken bowls flew in all directions, smashing recklessly and sending the bandits scurrying for cover. Seeing that the situation had taken a turn for the worse, that hesitant chief had a mind to flee. He looked back and was surprised to spot Cai Yu’s aide already pelting back toward the city.

“Son of a bitch!” the chief raged, taking to his heels after him.

But he was less lucky than his fellows: The sharp-eyed Fei Sheng’s hand deftly shot out and hauled him back. This chief was a common brute; he stood no chance against a well-trained member of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. He stumbled back into the horde of people, who swarmed him as he covered his face with his arms and rolled on the ground wailing.

The remaining bandits were already rattled. At the sight of these commoners with faces twisted like evil spirits as they pummeled one of their chiefs, they abandoned the battle entirely and fled back toward the city.

Cai Yu sat at a table in his manor awaiting news. The dishes before him had long gone cold. Hearing a sudden commotion outside, he leapt to his feet; yet he had only taken a few steps when a servant stumbled in and reported in a panic, “My lord, there’s a mob outside. They’ve surrounded our manor!”

Most of Cai Yu’s men had been dispatched out of the city; he had retained no more than five hundred people within the walls. Realization

dawned on him, and he hissed through clenched teeth, “I’ve been tricked!”

In sending his men away, he’d given the smaller gangs the opening they were waiting for.

“Tell the guards and the remaining men to keep an eye on every courtyard gate,” Cai Yu said. “Bring me my cloak. I’m going out to meet them personally!”

Cai Yu draped his cloak over his shoulders and secured his broadsword, then briskly marched outside with his entourage. The main manor doors were tightly shut. Cai Yu peered through the gap and saw nothing but torches. Though his heart was heavy, he faked a laugh. “And which young friend do we have here? I’ve no feast nor celebration going on tonight. Why raise such a fuss coming over to give your congratulations?”

Outside, Luo Mu replied in a leisurely tone, “Brother-in-Law, I hear you’re haunted by nightmares these days and can hardly sleep. I invited a couple of fellows to help dispel the evil energy in your manor.”

Cai Yu scowled when he recognized Luo Mu’s voice. “Mengzheng, I’ve always treated you well. I married my younger sister to you, yet you return my benefaction with enmity. And here I thought you were a man of principles.”

Without batting an eye, Luo Mu retorted, “Cai Yu, you took over the granaries and profited off the misfortune of others, abandoning the displaced and destitute commoners outside the city. You’ve long since deviated from the mold of the chivalrous bandit who robs the rich to feed the poor. As the prefect of Chazhou, I placated you for years so you would lower your guard. Now you’ve lost the hearts of the people. I advise you to drop your weapons and surrender while you still can.”

Cai Yu had never been good at masking his emotions; he was instantly apoplectic with rage. “Shameless bastard! You were so sincere when you asked for my sister’s hand in marriage, yet now you turn against me. You—you despicable coward!”

Luo Mu strode forward, unwilling to engage with Cai Yu any further. “Open the doors and surrender, or we shall break them down!”

“Who has the guts?!” Cai Yu hollered, gripping the broadsword hanging from his belt. “My blade hasn’t aged a bit. Anyone who dares take a step forward, I’ll have his life!”

Though he made an imposing sight, Cai Yu couldn’t withstand a siege on all sides. The guards in the Cai manor were ordinary men. When they saw the sinister glint of the swords awaiting them outside, they all had the urge to flee.

Surrounded by his bodyguards, Cai Yu avoided a volley of arrows that arced out of the darkness. “I’ll handsomely reward anyone who guards the manor! Young Master Yan personally put me in charge of Chazhou; he even calls me Pa. Luo Mu, if you harm a hair on my head tonight, the young master will ensure you pay it back twofold!”

Before Luo Mu could respond, he heard Kong Ling speak up beside him: “To whom does Chazhou belong? It’s bad enough you’re content being the Yan Clan’s lap dog, now you want the commoners of Chazhou to grovel with you?! You’re the accomplice to a tyrant; how many innocent commoners have died because of you! If we accomplish nothing else tonight, we will take you down!”

The moment the words left Kong Ling’s mouth, the men behind Luo Mu surged forward and smashed open the main gates of the outer courtyard. Yet Cai Yu refused to resign himself to his fate. He and the few remaining men in his residence fought bitterly even as they retreated. In under an hour, they had been forced back to the innermost courtyard of the estate.

In the vast darkness of the night, Cai Yu became a rat in the trap. He had spent half his life hailed as a hero among the commoners, yet in the end, he had cast his reputation into the dirt for the sake of money. At the sight of his fortune going up in flames, of his wives and children weeping, he felt the grief of a hero making his last stand. It was too late now for regrets.

Filled with contempt over Luo Mu’s betrayal, Cai Yu was determined to fight until the end. The streets outside the Cai manor became a scene of pandemonium as various gangs joined the fray. Cai Yu’s men fell one after

another. Just as he had completely lost heart and was preparing to take his own life, he heard a cry from amid the chaos: “Brother!”

Luo Mu cursed this ill-timed arrival. He turned back and shouted, “Take the young madam away!”

Concubine Cai had been coddled all her life, yet she had run the whole way here in her haste, losing her embroidered shoes and falling and scraping her hands. She spared not a thought for her sweat-soaked hair as she pointed a trembling finger at Luo Mu. For all of her fiery tempers, her choking sobs were utterly sincere. “Luo…Luo Mu! You…” She burst into fresh tears. “You vile, despicable man!”

Though he knew Kong Ling was watching, Luo Mu couldn’t help but step toward her.

Concubine Cai’s hair was disheveled, but she held her head high amid this scene of carnage. She spat at Luo Mu, tears streaming down her face. “I gave my heart to a dog! How could I have been deceived by a bastard like you?!”

She and Cai Yu were siblings with a large age gap. Although she was his younger sister by birth, Cai Yu had raised the girl like his own daughter. The two had grown up depending on each other and were as close as could be. Seeing Cai Yu surrounded on all sides, Concubine Cai understood her brother would not escape death tonight. She covered her face and wailed. “It was I who ruined you, Brother!”

The instant Kong Ling saw Concubine Cai cover her face, he knew it boded ill. He blurted out, “Quick, stop her!”

But it was too late. Concubine Cai pulled a golden hairpin from her hair. In the blink of an eye, blood splattered over her silk brocades. Cai Yu was overcome with grief at the sight of his sister sinking to the ground. As his enemies looked on, tears streamed down his face, and he threw his head back and cried out, “My silly little sister, it is clearly I who have ruined you!”

There was no more thought of taking his own life. With a deafening bellow, he charged the bandits surrounding him, hacking men down until,

exhausted, he could go on no longer. Yet even with his last breath he shouted, “I am Cai Yu of Chazhou. This is how I meet my end!”

When the first glimmer of dawn appeared on the horizon, the strife in the city had ceased. Half the walls encircling the Cai manor had collapsed, the prosperous image of yesterday having evaporated overnight. Attendants and maidservants swept gold and silver ornaments from the residence into their bundles as they fled into the first light of morning.

Kong Ling stood beside the body of Concubine Cai and watched the pool of blood slowly stain the hem of his robe. Cai Yu’s entire family had lost their lives to the bandits’ blades. Kong Ling waited for Luo Mu to come and collect Concubine Cai’s body for burial, only to hear from an attendant that Luo Mu had gone to see the Cai Clan’s granaries.

Kong Ling stood where he was and waited until past noon. Luo Mu never came.

With the death of Cai Yu, all the grain stores in Chazhou came under Luo Mu’s charge. He now possessed both Cai Yu’s grain and Cai Yu’s wealth. Cizhou’s grain wagons entered the city at last, but the money he had promised Cizhou never materialized. The price of grain in the city remained one tael for one dan of rice, the same price Cai Yu had set when he was alive.

Standing in the courtyard, Fei Sheng lamented, “Back when I was still working in the Imperial Prison, I often heard that son of a bitch Han Cheng speak of the difficulty of regional missions, and how the local bosses were all awfully shrewd. Their reputation is well-deserved.”

“They’re far craftier than the capital officials, that’s for sure.” Qiao Tianya pillowed his arms behind his head as he lay on a stone bench and basked in the sun. “No wonder he’s survived as the prefect of Chazhou all these years. He’s a real piece of work, that one.”

Beside them, Kong Ling was silent as he brewed tea.

Shen Zechuan, who had been in the main room, lifted the hanging screen and emerged. As the three of them made to get up, Shen Zechuan

motioned for them to stay where they were. “What time is it now?”

Fei Sheng jumped to be first to reply. “Almost noon.”

Shen Zechuan had come out holding his folding fan. Standing under the blinding sun, he shook open the fan and held it up to shade his eyes. “Chazhou has scored a victory, but we’ve yet to celebrate. Send Luo Mu an invitation: We’ll drink and feast here tonight.”

Fei Sheng acknowledged his orders and inquired, “Master, what if he doesn’t dare to come?”

Shen Zechuan tipped up his fan to reveal his eyes. With a smile in his voice, he said, “You think he doesn’t dare? It seems to me this man would dare anything.”

Hearing the edge in his voice, Fei Sheng hurried out to deliver the invitation.

Kong Ling had spent the past few days drinking and gambling, to all appearances having so much fun he had no intention of going home. Yet he stood up briskly when he saw Shen Zechuan descending the steps.

“I heard it was Mister Chengfeng who paid for Concubine Cai’s burial,” said Shen Zechuan.

“Oh.” Kong Ling tucked his hands into his sleeves; his fingers brushed the remaining fried soybeans from his last trip to the gambling den. “Yes, it was me.”

Shen Zechuan closed his folding fan and studied Kong Ling for a moment.

Kong Ling imagined Shen Zechuan was displeased, but he didn’t feel like explaining himself. Yet to his surprise, Shen Zechuan dropped the subject and drank half a cup of tea without probing further.

Suddenly remembering the wound Shen Zechuan had suffered on his left palm that night, Kong Ling felt another wave of exhaustion. He seemed to have barely done anything on this trip, yet he was more tired than he had ever been in Cizhou.

To Fei Sheng’s surprise, Luo Mu not only arrived promptly that evening, he came alone. The cook in Shen Zechuan’s manor was newly hired, and though his culinary skills were more than adequate, Shen Zechuan hadn’t asked for any elaborate preparations. Although he had proclaimed the meal a feast, the dishes were only slightly more refined than his usual fare. Refugees still littered the roads in Chazhou, and as such, Shen Zechuan ate simply as well.

After three rounds of wine, the atmosphere between the parties grew convivial. Fei Sheng noted that both Shen Zechuan and Luo Mu remained cordial, neither displaying any sign of discontent over the delay of the last few days.

Luo Mu lifted his cup in a toast. “Now that everything’s in place, we’re ready to discuss the trade of grain. I’ve been wondering, when does the vice commander plan to leave? It’ll be easier for me to get my advisors to draft a plan if I have a date to work with.”

Cai Yu had been dead for three days. The trade agreement between Cizhou and Chazhou had been discussed and settled long before they acted, yet Luo Mu was now trying to stall for time and run circles around Shen Zechuan. Luo Mu had said it himself to Kong Ling: Every extra dou of grain per tael was an equivalent reduction in profit; real silver was at stake here. Now that this money was in his hands, giving it up was harder than he’d imagined.

A pair of musicians, a girl and her blind old man, were in the hall singing a tune. Shen Zechuan watched the old man play the erhu, tapping his fingers gently on his fan as though he hadn’t heard Luo Mu’s question. Only after the tune was finished did Shen Zechuan respond with a smile. “I’m on a tight schedule. It’ll be in the next day or two.”

Luo Mu frowned, as if thinking hard. “Two days is too much of a rush. Can the vice commander not stay a few more days? You have yet to visit many of Chazhou’s most beautiful spots.”

Shen Zechuan shifted his gaze to Luo Mu’s face. “My family at home is as anxious for my return as I am.”

His answer had been gentle, but Luo Mu instantly curbed his frivolity. He straightened up in his seat and said, solemn, “I see. How about this, then? The vice commander may return home, and when we’ve drafted a satisfactory plan, I’ll send someone over with it. Chengfeng may stay to oversee things on behalf of Cizhou.”

Kong Ling drew breath to speak, but Shen Zechuan tapped his fan lightly against the edge of the table, and he kept his mouth shut. Fan in his fingers, Shen Zechuan fixed his eyes on Luo Mu and raised his voice to call to the blind old man: “Play another tune, one from Chazhou. Doesn’t Chazhou have that song ‘To Kill a Bandit’?”

The blind old man gave a slight nod and shifted aside so his granddaughter could take up the pipa and start playing. Shen Zechuan did not acknowledge Luo Mu’s suggestion, and Luo Mu, sitting across from him, didn’t dare bring the idea up again. Initially, he could still look Shen Zechuan in the eye, but as the tune took on a murderous tone, he began to sweat profusely.

Shen Zechuan lifted the lid of his teacup. “This tea was a gift from Your Excellency. It’s fine tea. Is it from Hezhou?”

Luo Mu forced a laugh. “We found it during our search of the Cai manor. I’m afraid I’m no expert when it comes to tea, so it’s better gifted to the vice commander.”

Shen Zechuan chuckled. “I don’t like tea.”

The girl’s fingers slid along the pipa strings, each strum like blades slicing through the air, perforating Luo Mu’s eardrums. Before long, his back was soaked with sweat. The song seemed to go on interminably. Their table full of dishes had gone cold, the most striking of which were the large lion’s head meatballs in front of him.

By the time Luo Mu got up to leave, his legs had gone numb.

Shen Zechuan stood under the eaves and said to Fei Sheng, “Escort His Excellency back. It’s a rather long journey.”

Luo Mu forced himself to bow, glancing at Kong Ling several times before finally following Fei Sheng out the door.

Less than four hours later, the previously-agreed-upon deal documents and money were delivered to Shen Zechuan's manor.

As Luo Mu lay awake in the middle of the night, he was struck by a single thought: Shen Zechuan had known all along what Luo Mu planned to do.

Luo Mu had hoped to send Shen Zechuan off and wait for the message from the Yan Clan, originally meant for Cai Yu. Cai Yu was no more, but Luo Mu could rise to the occasion—he could do exactly what Cai Yu had done for the Yan Clan. The price of grain Cizhou offered was indeed low, but that was only good for commoners. There was nothing in it for Luo Mu. Even the small profit he had made when he worked under Cai Yu might be lost.

He had initially thought that, as Shen Zechuan hadn't brought many men along, the vice commander wouldn't dare lay a hand on him. If Luo Mu could successfully stall him, then even before Shen Zechuan reached Cizhou again, Luo Mu would already have made contact with the Yan Clan. When the time came for Cizhou to return to collect on their debt, he would have the backing and confidence to reject their trade agreement.

Yet tonight, Shen Zechuan's message had been loud and clear. He had seen straight through Luo Mu's ploy. He was in a rush to settle this business, and if Luo Mu beat around the bush and placed his hopes on the Yan Clan of Hezhou instead, Shen Zechuan would simply kill Luo Mu now. That song had been as pointed a response as a sword to the throat.

Closing his eyes, Luo Mu recalled Shen Zechuan's handling of the bandits outside the city walls. A man who dared put his own life on the line for his goals wasn't concerned with the consequences of killing Luo Mu. Long before they had agreed to move against Cai Yu, Shen Zechuan had said that he and Kong Ling were here to do business. In hindsight, Luo Mu realized that those words had been an early warning from Shen Zechuan to him.

Two days later, Shen Zechuan assigned Fei Sheng to remain in Chazhou, where he could continue recording the prices of staples and keep

an eye on Luo Mu. Cizhou's grain wagons entered the granaries, while the shopkeeper from the cosmetics shop kept track of the accounts. With this, the grain trade between Cizhou and Chazhou was established. The price Shen Zechuan had settled on with Zhou Gui and the others back in Cizhou was one tael of silver for one dan and eight dou of rice, but it had ended up a little higher, at one tael for one dan and six dou. However, the price was still lower than that of Juexi.

As part of buying grain from Cizhou, Luo Mu not only had to set up tents to hand out porridge, he also had to think about how to make the most of the money he spent. Chazhou's most pressing problem was the re-implementation of the household register. He now held the food supply of all the minor bandits in his hands; he could easily enlist them into the garrison troops. There were still details to be hammered out, but they could be discussed when the bulk of the grain arrived from Cizhou. And with Fei Sheng remaining behind, Shen Zechuan would also have eyes on the movements of the Yan Clan in Hezhou.

He had successively dismantled two of the Yan Clan's major agents in Zhongbo, and the Yan Clan was not the kind of family to take this lying down. The two had initially had nothing to do with each other, but now, the Yan Clan was forced to turn their attention to Zhongbo, and to Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan didn't stay any longer than necessary—he climbed into his carriage that very day and left the city. As they approached the border of Chazhou's territory, they heard the sounds of a carriage racing to catch up to them.

Qiao Tianya lifted a corner of the curtain and whispered to Shen Zechuan inside, "It's Luo Mu."

He had come to see them off. Qiao Tianya deflected him with an excuse that Shen Zechuan was unwell today, and Luo Mu didn't press the issue. He had mainly come to see Kong Ling, anyway. The two men got out of their carriages and walked for a while along the public road.

Luo Mu produced some pastries wrapped in oilpaper from inside his lapels. "You loved these back when we were students. I saw someone

selling them when I left the manor and bought them on a whim. Take them with you for the road."

Kong Ling looked at the oilpaper wrapper. "That was so many years ago, yet you still remember."

Luo Mu smiled ruefully. "Yes. I ought to remember. Will you come back with the grain wagons?"

Kong Ling accepted the package and walked in silence for a moment. He didn't answer. Luo Mu stared at Kong Ling the way he always had, all those years ago.

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Holding the bundle of pastries, Kong Ling said suddenly, “Back then, when we completed our education, you asked if I was going to Qudu, and I didn’t answer. Eventually we went our separate ways. Did you ever go back to visit the school?”

“After I left school,” Luo Mu answered, “I went west with my family. We spent several years living in Qudu…”

Kong Ling turned back and finally met Luo Mu’s eye. “Mengzheng.”

Luo Mu waited, but Kong Ling did not continue. Luo Mu couldn’t help but laugh. “While I was in Qudu, I heard you went to work for Tantai Long. He was a good official, and you did great things together. Why didn’t you ever marry?”

Why didn’t I marry?

Kong Ling repeated the words to himself in silence and slowly started laughing. He was already an old man, yet at this moment, he gave off the same aura of gentleness and composure he had possessed in his youth. There were still will and spirit in those eyes, even if they were no longer so bright as they had once been. Clutching the packet of pastries, he said, “I should go.”

The wind skated over the blades of grass. Kong Ling turned without waiting for Luo Mu’s reply.

Luo Mu stood and watched Kong Ling’s sleeves flutter amid the breeze. His throat tightened. He couldn’t help taking a step after him, nor reaching out with his hand. The dusting of white in Kong Ling’s hair seemed to disperse in the wind, covered by the dancing leaves swirling past. Dazed, Luo Mu felt he was seeing through time, to a moment many years ago.

Kong Ling had missed a great number of things in his life, but not because he didn’t fight for them. He had once tossed and turned in bed over an invitation, yet all that had greeted him after pacing to and fro as he waited in the school courtyard was a downpour of summer rain. He’d waited in the rain until his eyes were wet. After that, he’d traveled far from home and settled in a distant land.

Luo Mengzheng was a fickle man.

That day in the rain, Kong Chengfeng had come to understand this. Many years later, he waited again, yet all he had to show for this endeavor was a bloodstained hem.

Both times, Luo Mu did not come. And after today, Kong Ling and Luo Mu would never cross paths again.

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Chapter 142:
Inkling

WHO WAS THE YOUNG master in white who had handed out porridge on the outskirts of Chazhou? Countless commoners inside and outside the city scrambled to guess. Some insisted he was an advisor to Zhou Gui; others labeled him a distant nephew of Kong Ling. Rumors abounded, but no one could provide a concrete explanation. It was only after Shen Zechuan left the city that his true identity as the eighth common son of the Shen Clan spread through the streets like wildfire, promptly becoming the topic on everyone's lips in Chazhou.

Compared to the tempest of public opinion they left behind, Shen Zechuan's journey back was calm, unremarkable, and for the most part silent. They returned along the public roads at a leisurely pace.

Recalling that Shen Zechuan had fallen ill on the way over, Kong Ling and Qiao Tianya had gone to great pains to make arrangements before embarking on the journey back. They even purchased a heavy coat from a Hezhou merchant to cope with any sudden cold spells they might encounter during their journey.

"You ought to get a physician to take a look at the vice commander when we return," Kong Ling, who was attentive to such things, told Qiao Tianya. "He must take the time to improve his health while he's home. Otherwise, whenever he travels in the future, you'll be holding your breath the whole way."

Cradling a bowl of water in his hands, Qiao Tianya glanced at the carriage parked under the shade of the trees. "Where are we going to find a good physician? Considering the state of my master's health, only an expert physician could make a diagnosis. We are his guards; no matter concerning our master is too troublesome. I merely worry that my master will protest at inconveniencing us."

Kong Ling knew nothing about Shen Zechuan's consumption of medicine in his youth; he had always assumed his health was simply poor.

But from the way Qiao Tianya spoke, it was clear Shen Zechuan had once been stronger, back in Qudu.

Qiao Tianya took a sip of water and said no more. During the dull journey the past two days, he had repeatedly considered the night the bandits attacked them outside Chazhou. He felt that even if Shen Zechuan had planned to injure himself in order to trap the enemy, he shouldn't have been hurt so badly. Once a body grew accustomed to reacting quickly, it was remarkably difficult to control oneself from blocking an attack on instinct.

He had seen Shen Zechuan draw his blade. To others, Avalanche was too long a blade, but because Shen Zechuan was so swift, it was perfect for him. Qiao Tianya had examined the wound on Shen Zechuan's palm after the incident and found the injury unusual.

Although Shen Zechuan looked as he always did and had never said a word otherwise, Qiao Tianya guessed Shen Zechuan hadn't drawn his blade recently because he had something to hide. If this guess was correct, then Shen Zechuan had likely sensed his body weakening much earlier than any of those around him. Yet it hadn't even been six months since the day they left Qudu.

This matter must be conveyed to Shifu and the marquis as soon as possible.

As Qiao Tianya pondered, he dumped out the remaining water, put away the bowl, and rose to instruct the men around him: "Break's over. Let's keep going."

The sound of movement outside woke Shen Zechuan from his nap. His neck was sore and aching, so he rested his temple against the side of the carriage and slowly exhaled. The curtains were raised, and as he was too lazy to move, he remained in position and watched the trees along the road slowly recede as the horses broke into a trot.

"Where are we?" Shen Zechuan's voice was slightly hoarse.

Qiao Tianya sat in the driver's seat outside the front curtain, bamboo hat on to block out the sun. "We should reach Chazhou's border tonight. In two more days, we'll arrive in Cizhou's territory."

This public road had fallen into disrepair over the past few years, and their bumpy journey along it gave Shen Zechuan a constant headache. “The next time we ship grain to Chazhou, tell Luo Mu to shell out the money for workers to fix this road.”

Qiao Tianya heaved a dramatic sigh. “Then what about when we travel to Libei? The roads there are even more difficult for carriages.”

“The roads in Libei are all constructed to be wide and flat to facilitate the passage of the armored cavalry.” Shen Zechuan roused himself a little. “Careful not to let the marquis hear you’ve been slandering him behind his back.”

Qiao Tianya plucked the stalk of grass he’d been chewing out of his mouth. “I’m happy to say it to his face. When the marquis comes back, your first concern should be making sure he doesn’t see that injury of yours.”

Shen Zechuan raised his left hand. Although the wound had been bandaged, his palm grew sweaty in the hot weather, and stung like being bitten by ants. “Xiao Ce’an is busy in Libei; he won’t be back for a month or more. If you don’t mention it, then he won’t find out.”

Qiao Tianya put the stalk of grass back in his mouth.

“Are you going to tell on me?” Shen Zechuan asked.

“Hang on,” Qiao Tianya said as he steered the carriage. “Let’s talk about it a little later. I can’t hear you clearly from out here.”

Shen Zechuan dropped his hand to his lap. “I’ll write him a letter when we return, and we’ll consider the matter over and done with.” He thought for a moment; then, feeling the nape of his neck tingle hotly as if in memory of being bitten by Xiao Er, he repeated emphatically, “The matter will be over and done with.”

Nodding along as he tugged on the reins, Qiao Tianya thought, *As expected, tattling to the marquis is the best way to handle him. Tried and tested!*

Shen Zechuan had been away from Cizhou half a month. As they traveled, the heat of the seventh month subsided. Cizhou, located farther

north and closer to Libei, was much cooler than Chazhou, and signs of autumn were already beginning to appear.

Zhou Gui was eagerly awaiting their return and had long been standing outside the city to welcome them back. Upon seeing the carriage approach, he lifted his robes and jogged up to them, beaming. “Vice Commander! Chengfeng! You’ve had a long journey. Come on in. I’ve prepared a feast to welcome you back!”

They paused outside the city gates long enough to exchange courtesies before heading in together. Zhou Gui hosted them in his own residence, though he hardly mentioned any official business at the table. He knew Shen Zechuan had taken ill during the journey, and after the meal was over, he personally saw Shen Zechuan to the door of his manor, emphasizing that there was no urgency regarding any administrative affairs and that there would be time for discussion after the vice commander had rested for the night.

Despite these solicitous words, Shen Zechuan left Qiao Tianya behind in the Zhou manor. When Zhou Gui and Kong Ling gathered the other advisors in the study that night to discuss their trip to Chazhou, Qiao Tianya would be available to listen and answer any questions so as to not delay the proceedings.

Ji Gang too had been waiting a long time, standing at the entrance of the alley that led to their residence in Cizhou. The moment Shen Zechuan came into view, he stepped out to greet him. Daylight had turned to dusk, and with Shen Zechuan’s sleeves hanging over his hands, Ji Gang saw nothing amiss. He gave Shen Zechuan a once-over, then immediately asked, “How did you fall sick on the road? I worried the weather would change while you were traveling, so I even instructed Songyue to bring an overcoat.”

Shen Zechuan lifted his right arm and guided his shifu through the door. “It was just a cold. I’m perfectly well now. Shifu, have you taken your meal? I sat down for supper earlier in the Zhou manor, but I’ve yet to eat my fill.”

Ji Gang walked side by side with Shen Zechuan through the door. He had intended to question him further about his illness, but Shen Zechuan's mention of supper steered him off course. He said happily, "I guessed as much. I knew you'd arrive home today, so I made a special trip this morning to choose a couple of plump fish. Shifu will make you whatever you want. They've already been cleaned, and the rest of the ingredients are all prepared—it'll be ready in no time!"

Ding Tao skipped up behind them and poked his head around Ji Gang. "Gongzi—Gongzi is back!"

Li Xiong, trailing a few steps behind, followed suit and also shouted, "Gongzi!" Ding Tao's sparrow leapt onto his shoulder and chirped away. They were just inside the entrance to the courtyard, yet the scene was livelier than the street outside. The flowers and plants in the courtyard had been tended with such care that they were noticeably lusher than when Shen Zechuan had left. The spacious hall of the main room was lit with lanterns, and the bamboo blinds had all been lifted, making for a homely sight.

Shen Zechuan ate his second evening meal, this one with Ji Gang, and asked after Ding Tao's and Li Xiong's progress in their martial arts. Fortunately it was his left hand that had been injured; he rested it on his knee throughout the meal, and Ji Gang never suspected a thing. The lively atmosphere persisted until nearly midnight, when Ji Gang told Shen Zechuan to rest early. As it was Qiao Tianya's turn for night duty, Ji Gang took Ding Tao and Li Xiong back to their courtyard with him to sleep.

It was only when the room was once again silent that Shen Zechuan breathed a sigh of relief and slipped off his outer robe. The maidservants lowered the drapes outside the bed chamber and lit the incense. The masters of the house permitted no one to remain in the bed chamber to serve at night, so the maidservants withdrew to the veranda, leaving Shen Zechuan alone.

He bathed, changed, and returned to his room, where he draped his outer robe back over his shoulders. He lit a lamp and sat to write a letter.

Hours later, Qiao Tianya returned and set the report Zhou Gui and the others had freshly drafted on Shen Zechuan's desk.

Shen Zechuan sealed his letter. “What’s the latest news from Libei?”

Qiao Tianya, carrying his coat over his arm, answered, “You won’t like it. Better for you to get a good night’s sleep tonight and hear it tomorrow morning.”

Shen Zechuan flipped through Zhou Gui’s report. “The worst news I can hear is that the Biansha Horsemen have fought their way to our doorstep. Go ahead and tell me.”

Qiao Tianya turned the chair around and sat astride it. “Not *that* bad. It’s the marquis. He brought the Imperial Army into Libei, but he didn’t head directly north to the homeland to meet with the heir. He stopped at Border Camp near Zhongbo. After one night in Border Camp, he led the troops east to launch an assault on the occupied Third Sand Camp, scoring a victory there against Biansha and distinguishing himself to the prince.”

Lifting his eyes from the report, Shen Zechuan thought for a moment, then laughed. “Retaking Third Sand Camp is no small achievement.”

“Right?” Qiao Tianya agreed. “Such an accomplishment ought to be rewarded.”

“And what did His Lordship reward him with?”

Qiao Tianya lifted one finger. “Our marquis received a single camp in reward.”

Shen Zechuan raised his eyebrows.

“Border Camp,” Qiao Tianya continued. “His Lordship ordered the marquis to stay there and handed command of Third Sand Camp, which the marquis fought to take back, over to Guo Weili instead. Remember him? The man who framed Gu Jin for colluding with the enemy. Apparently, the handover was not pleasant. The marquis retreated to the rear, sandwiched between Third Sand Camp and the Liuyang Camps. There’s been no sign of him in the battles in the north or east.”

Shen Zechuan slowly closed the report. “Border Camp is a major camp used by the heir as a supply base. If he’s remaining there, Ce’an will be managing Libei’s equipment and supplies.”

Yet there was no shortage of supply officers in the Libei Armored Cavalry; why must Xiao Fangxu give this job to Xiao Chiye? All else aside, it was far more difficult for Xiao Chiye to distinguish himself as a general handling military supplies than as a commanding general of Third Sand Camp. If Xiao Chiye was in command of Third Sand Camp, then as long as he led the Imperial Army in a few successful battles against Biansha, the merits he accumulated would help dispel any gossip about him among the officers loyal to his brother. When the time came for him to step onto the battlefield in the north, he would have the confidence and credentials to fight beside Libei's other commanding generals.

However, as a general overseeing supplies in Border Camp, Xiao Chiye held the lowest rank among them. He would be at the other generals' beck and call, charged with delivering equipment and supplies across Libei's vast territory. This was not only a difficult job logistically, it also made him susceptible to bullying and mistreatment. Though he would endure the same hardships as his fellow officers, his military achievements would never measure up to those of the commanding generals fighting on the front lines.

After a moment of silence, Qiao Tianya said tentatively, "The disparity between his treatment of the marquis and the heir is extraordinary. Are you sure His Lordship didn't find the marquis in a ditch on the side of the road as a baby?"

Shen Zechuan leveled him with a cool look. "Are you sure your father didn't find you in one?"

Qiao Tianya raised his hands in surrender and shut his mouth.

Shen Zechuan passed the sealed letter to Qiao Tianya. "Send someone to deliver it tonight. It's late; no need to stand guard outside. Go back and get some rest."

Just before Qiao Tianya crossed the threshold, Shen Zechuan called his name.

When Qiao Tianya looked back and saw Shen Zechuan's expression, he said, perfectly earnest, "I know. I remember. The matter of your injury is over and done with. I won't breathe a word to the marquis."

Whatever Shen Zechuan had been about to say flew out of his mind at this quip. He waved him off in silence, shooing Qiao Yueyue out the door.

Shen Zechuan didn’t remain at his desk long after Qiao Tianya left. It was past midnight. He blew out the lamp and got into bed, listening to the croaking of frogs from the pond in the courtyard. He didn’t know if it was Ding Tao or Li Xiong who had caught the frogs and brought them to the pond, but the little creatures made such a din he couldn’t sleep.

Only much later did Shen Zechuan’s consciousness at last begin to dim. He was alone in the bed, with only the refreshing sweetness of incense for company, yet as he slept, it somehow soured into the metallic stench of blood. The Chashi Sinkhole, which had not appeared in his dreams for a very long time, yawned at his feet. Shen Zechuan looked down, but there was nothing inside.

The faint croaking of the frogs crowded in his ears. In his sleep, Shen Zechuan broke into a sweat and unconsciously turned over with his back to the windows.

There was no snowstorm over the Chashi Sinkhole tonight. The sun hung high in the sky, blazing down so hot Shen Zechuan felt the stinging pain on his skin. He couldn’t stop sweating. There were no corpses in this pit, yet Shen Zechuan felt himself surrounded by a crush of people he could not see. They smothered him until he couldn’t breathe. He pulled apart his tightly fastened collar between gasps for air. Through the sweat running into his eyes, he spotted a figure lying in the sinkhole.

It was himself.

A chill ran down Shen Zechuan’s spine. He thought he could hear Qi Huilian. His teacher was shouting for him from the depths of the crowd, but his voice was drowned out by the croaking of the frogs. Shen Zechuan never used to be afraid of returning to the Chashi Sinkhole; he didn’t fear this place at all. Yet, at this moment, he felt the desperate urge to flee.

Shen Zechuan sensed someone approaching, and his eyes flew open.

Xiao Chiye had been moving as quietly as he could. He had only removed half of his armor; not expecting Shen Zechuan to wake so

suddenly, he froze by the bedside, still holding his armguard.

They stared at each other for a moment.

Sensing something amiss, Xiao Chiye tossed the armguard aside and shoved his narrow, sweat-drenched sleeves up his arms. He squatted at the side of the bed and cupped Shen Zechuan's cheeks in his hands. "What are you peeping at?"

Only then did Shen Zechuan seem to return to his senses.

Xiao Chiye leaned in and looked at Shen Zechuan with a sharp, penetrating gaze. His eyes were like stars in the pitch-dark room, so bright and calm Shen Zechuan's mind gradually cleared. Xiao Chiye smoothed Shen Zechuan's sweat-damp hair and complained in a low whisper, "Hell of a rough ride to get here. Tell Zhou Gui to fix that road as soon as possible. They'd already closed the city gates for the night, so I ended up squatting outside and yelling myself hoarse."

For some reason, this amused Shen Zechuan to no end. He chuckled as he nestled his cheek against Xiao Chiye's palm. He had only just woken from his nightmare, the scene of his own corpse at the bottom of the pit still fresh in his mind. But in an instant, he forgot all about it. He asked suspiciously, "How did you get in, then?"

Xiao Chiye took a deep breath and admitted, "I scaled the walls. Snowcrest is still tethered out there."

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Chapter 143:
Hiding

XIAO CHIYE was running hot. After riding half the night, he was drenched in sweat. He reluctantly released Shen Zechuan and continued removing his armor. As Shen Zechuan sat up, Xiao Chiye asked, “Have you eaten tonight? I’ll have something to tide me over. I met the courier delivering your letter on my way, so I intercepted him. I’ve got it with me.”

Shen Zechuan, who had been about to get out of bed, paused. He leaned over and watched Xiao Chiye with a hint of seduction in his gaze. “Where’d you put it?”

Raising a finger, Xiao Chiye tapped his chest. Shen Zechuan extended his right hand expectantly. Xiao Chiye set his armor down and planted his hands on his knees, glancing up at Shen Zechuan. “Want it back? Come get it.”

Shen Zechuan felt a tingle arc down his spine under Xiao Chiye’s gaze. He placed his hand on Xiao Chiye’s chest and slid his fingers downward. All he could feel were the hard lines of Xiao Chiye’s sweat-drenched torso. He whispered as if he hadn’t understood, “Give it back.”

He still had the dazed look of a person not fully awake, yet his fingertips were feeling their way across Xiao Chiye’s body with ease and familiarity. They wandered, teasingly light; he didn’t mind letting Xiao Chiye know his drowsy appearance was merely an act.

Xiao Chiye deliberately slowed his breathing, afraid he would forget to restrain himself and devour Shen Zechuan in an instant. He appeared unmoved, pursuing Shen Zechuan with only an ardent gaze.

Shen Zechuan ran his hand all over that sturdy torso, his breath intertwining with Xiao Chiye’s as he moved in. They pressed closer, Xiao Chiye hovering over him on the bed. Shen Zechuan’s expressive eyes glimmered with ripples of desire as he murmured, “Ce’an, I can’t find it.”

Xiao Chiye allowed Shen Zechuan's fingers to roam as they pleased. He tilted his head slightly, catching a hint of Shen Zechuan's scent. Shen Zechuan seized the opening and pressed his cheek into him, nuzzling gently at his jaw. The satisfaction brimming in the corners of his eyes gripped Xiao Chiye's heart and squeezed.

Still sweating, Xiao Chiye laughed out loud—a short, sharp sound. He set his hand on the small of Shen Zechuan's back, pulling him so close Shen Zechuan was plastered against him in his embrace. There was no air between them as their lips met; Shen Zechuan kissed Xiao Chiye, who bit him in return.

As Shen Zechuan was pinned down into the sheets, he swiftly grabbed the nape of Xiao Chiye's neck with his injured left hand. The bedding dipped under their weight. Shen Zechuan's inner garment hung open in disarray. As Xiao Chiye knelt over him, eyes fixed on Shen Zechuan, a fan fell out of his robes.

Shen Zechuan's fingers had only just closed around the fan when he saw the letter fall out after it.

Xiao Chiye's hand shot out, but the sharp-eyed Shen Zechuan deftly used the fan to push the letter to the edge of the bed. He flipped the fan and rested it against Xiao Chiye's chin, gently lifting his jaw, and planted a kiss on Xiao Chiye's lips.

Absorbed in the kiss, Xiao Chiye seemed not to notice the letter—his arousal had become impossible to ignore. They had been apart a long time, and now that they were reunited, Xiao Chiye indulged Shen Zechuan's urge to tease him; he caressed Shen Zechuan until he was flushed all over, then took him until waves of passion crashed over Shen Zechuan and he trembled uncontrollably.

Narrowing his eyes, Shen Zechuan reminded himself with his last scraps of rationality to toss the letter under the bed later. Yet before he could finish formulating his plan, Xiao Chiye flipped him over.

He held Shen Zechuan's waist, admiring the contours of his back and the exquisite curve of his spine. Shen Zechuan's inner garment had gone translucent with sweat. From behind, it appeared to offer an unobstructed

glimpse of the picturesque view beneath, yet that tempting expanse was still shrouded under a thin mist of white—distant and unattainable.

Shen Zechuan looked back over his shoulder, wetting his lips.

Xiao Chiye went on the offensive, seizing his territory—all of this belonged to him: The scorching heat. The damp sweat. The soft moans and the look in his eyes. The fine shivers that wracked his limbs. Even the scent Shen Zechuan emitted along with the rocking of their bodies. He claimed all of it; it was all his—Xiao Chiye's.

The mere thought broke open a limitless well of exhilaration inside him. Shen Zechuan knew him too well; every sultry look he gave struck true. Xiao Chiye's passion made him forceful; the more he cherished this man, the more terrifying his strength as he moved.

He wanted to hold him so tight it crushed him to pieces.

Xiao Chiye mouthed at Shen Zechuan's right ear, holding the jade bead between his lips.

Face down in the sheet, Shen Zechuan was pushed to the edge; Xiao Chiye was so deep inside him that his sweat and tears stained the bedsheets, but there was nowhere for him to escape. His hips and ankles were restrained as though with a heavy chain under Xiao Chiye's weight. He ached and even felt a little pain, yet that pain sent sparks of electricity through his body, rendering it pleasantly numb. It banished every thought of his nightmares. There was only Xiao Chiye, Xiao Chiye, Xiao Chiye.

Shen Zechuan shivered, drenched in sweat. In the moment before he let himself fall apart, he murmured, "*Ce'an*."

Xiao Chiye was nowhere close to done, yet at Shen Zechuan's soft, languid call, his hips stuttered as he came.

Body limp, Shen Zechuan buried his head in his arms and gasped desperately for breath, still trembling in the aftermath. The bedding under his knees was wet. Xiao Chiye bent over and covered Shen Zechuan's back with his broad chest. He had yet to pull out, and as he pressed forward, he advanced deeper instead of retreating, dragging a muffled moan from Shen

Zechuan. Xiao Chiye brushed aside the mess of pillows and enveloped him with his body. “I’ll sleep better with you in my arms.”

Shen Zechuan’s earlobes were red from a hundred bites, and Xiao Chiye’s hot breath made them simultaneously numb and sore. He lifted his cheek from his arms, his eyes red-rimmed and wet as he mouthed: *You’re so mean*.

Without moving, Xiao Chiye kissed him, lips soft and still; only then did their ravenous appetites begin to settle. Shen Zechuan was bearing all of Xiao Chiye’s weight, yet he felt strangely relaxed, as if the mere presence of Xiao Chiye at his back was an impenetrable shield.

Xiao Chiye ran a hand down Shen Zechuan’s side. He understood this man too well—he could tell exactly how much weight Shen Zechuan had lost just by holding him. He nudged a lock of hair by Shen Zechuan’s ear aside with the tip of his nose and murmured, “Did everything go smoothly in Chazhou? You’ve gotten thinner again.”

Shen Zechuan thought for a moment and shook his head.

“What happened with Luo Mu? Did he give you attitude?” Xiao Chiye probed.

Pursing his lips tightly, Shen Zechuan continued shaking his head.

Xiao Chiye exhaled a puff of warm breath and teased, “Did those Chazhou bandits make trouble for you? I’ll send the Imperial Army over right away.”

Shen Zechuan’s eyes were half-lidded. “It’s from missing you.” Shen Zechuan didn’t wait for him to answer before he went on. “I get cold sleeping alone on an empty bed.”

Xiao Chiye held him tighter, grasping both of Shen Zechuan’s wrists. He was about to reply when he caught a glimpse of white out of the corner of his eye. He pulled out the left hand Shen Zechuan had kept hidden under the blankets and turned it over, exposing the gauze wrapped around it. His eyes shifted to Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan buried his head in the bedsheets.

“Shen Lanzhou.” Xiao Chiye pulled Shen Zechuan’s face around by the chin and said, enunciating each word, “You sure know how to hide things, *hm*?”

Bright and early the next morning, Qiao Tianya retrieved Snowcrest from outside the city walls. When he arrived back at the manor, he saw Meng striding around by himself under the eaves. He whistled at the gyrfalcon and asked quietly, “Where’s your master?”

Meng paid him no mind and went about his business.

Qiao Tianya saw that the bamboo blinds in the main room had been partially lifted, but there were no attendants waiting under the eaves. The spacious room was bright inside; Shen Zechuan sat behind the desk holding a book before his face, revealing only a pair of eyes that peered across the desk at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye had one of his long legs propped up as he leaned back in his chair, rotating his thumb ring. At the sound of Qiao Tianya’s footsteps, he said without looking back, “Get in here.”

Noting the queer atmosphere, Qiao Tianya ducked under the blinds to enter and asked with a smile, “Nice day, isn’t it? How about lunch in the courtyard?”

When Xiao Chiye didn’t answer, Shen Zechuan glanced over and motioned for Qiao Tianya to continue.

“You, shut up,” Xiao Chiye said.

Qiao Tianya sensibly shut his mouth and looked at Shen Zechuan with an expression that said *I can’t help you*.

Xiao Chiye worried the notch on his thumb ring with a finger, remembering yet another matter. “Call Ding Tao over.”

Ding Tao was standing at the courtyard entrance when he saw Qiao Tianya step onto the veranda and beckon him. Reluctant to go on in, he clasped his hands behind his back and rubbed at the fresh mud between his fingers, then shuffled over at a snail’s pace to the bottom of the steps.

Gripped by an inexplicable fear, he craned his neck forward and said in a small voice, “I’m here.”

“Get your ass in here, now,” barked Xiao Chiye.

Ding Tao leapt up the rest of the steps, then slowed as he cautiously made his way inside. When he saw Qiao Tianya standing in the corner pretending to be a wooden stump and Shen Zechuan staring at a book, he felt certain he was in for a beating.

“Where did the frogs in the pond come from?” Xiao Chiye asked.

Hands behind his back, Ding Tao looked down at his shoes and answered, “Caught them outside the city.”

“It must’ve been hard catching them out there and bringing them all the way back home, hm?” said Xiao Chiye. “That’s quite a distance.”

Ding Tao braced himself. “N-not too bad?”

“When no one’s home, you just do whatever you want, yes?” Xiao Chiye sneered. “I had the pond cleaned just before I left, and you turn around and throw frogs into it.”

He had merely caught them for fun. Ding Tao had initially planned to put them in his own courtyard, but there was no pond there. Besides, Shen Zechuan wasn’t home two weeks ago, so he and Li Xiong had caught a whole bunch and tossed them into the pond, only to forget about them a few days later. He’d never guessed his master would return so suddenly!

Ding Tao stole a glance at Shen Zechuan and mourned his own demise.

“Who are you looking at?” Xiao Chiye demanded.

Ding Tao instantly lowered his head again, timid as a quail.

“Go,” Xiao Chiye continued. “I want them out of there by nightfall. If I hear a single croak tonight, I’ll get someone to fish them up, bring them to your room, and make you sleep with them for company.”

How would Ding Tao dare raise any objections? He nodded vigorously, then leapt up and dashed out to the veranda, shouting, “Big Bear

—” Catching himself, he belatedly covered his mouth and whispered in a tiny voice, “Come catch the frogs!”

Shen Zechuan shifted in his seat, holding the book steadily before his eyes.

Xiao Chiye’s eyes never left him, although he addressed his question to Qiao Tianya: “What happened in Chazhou? Your master couldn’t tell me the whole story, so I’ll have it from you.”

Qiao Tianya scratched his head. He was beginning to envy Fei Sheng, who’d been left behind in Chazhou. Qiao Tianya had slept well last night, but he had been neglecting his appearance lately and had not taken time to shave his stubble. He stood in the harsh morning light and recited everything that happened in Chazhou as concisely as possible, leaving nothing out. He didn’t even hide Shen Zechuan’s illness. If Xiao Chiye hadn’t returned, then any omissions in Qiao Tianya’s reports could be excused as carried out under Shen Zechuan’s orders. But now that Xiao Chiye was back, Qiao Tianya took the opportunity to come clean.

When he had finished, he didn’t wait for further instructions before adding, “They’re still discussing the trade agreement with Chazhou over at the Zhou manor. Since Master is staying home today, I’d best be off.”

With that, he ducked past the bamboo blinds and fled with extraordinary speed.

Shen Zechuan had hardly slept a wink the night before and felt himself nodding off as he read. He glanced over at Xiao Chiye once again. When he saw Xiao Chiye looking back, he blinked as though he had only just noticed his eyes on him. He was putting on a rather convincing act.

He was met with silence.

Shen Zechuan let the book slip down and revealed his face. “A-Ye, I’m so hungry.”

Xiao Chiye folded up the opened letter and stuffed it back under his shirt in the same place it had occupied before.

Stretching his leg out, Shen Zechuan stepped lightly on the tip of Xiao Chiye’s shoe. He set the book aside and bent over the table, his toe

nudging up along Xiao Chiye's calf.

Xiao Chiye stared at him and said callously from across the table, "You've knifed me in the heart and ripped my insides to shreds. It's too late, Shen Lanzhou. I'm dead."

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Chapter 144:
Orange Jasmine

XIAO CHIYE had rushed back to Cizhou on horseback and could only stay a single night; he had to head back after midnight. He was on a tight schedule, and in order to ensure that the transportation of supplies to the battlefield was not delayed, he had been on the road for eight or nine days in a row, running himself ragged, all to squeeze out two extra days to come see Shen Zechuan.

Yet he hadn't expected to end up so angry!

Holding Meng, Xiao Chiye removed the anklet from the gyrfalcon's leg before putting it back on again; Meng flapped his wings and threw a tantrum. Xiao Chiye wanted to throw a tantrum too. He was deeply vexed, and grew angrier the more he thought about it.

When Ji Gang returned from his stroll with his birdcage in hand, he was taken aback to see Xiao Chiye. After a moment of hesitation, he entered. Xiao Chiye paid his respects.

"The war in the north is at a critical point." Ji Gang handed over the birdcage; Xiao Chiye was so tall Ji Gang had to look up at him to speak. "Your shifu must be worn out."

Xiao Chiye hung the cage up in the eaves. "The fighting's been rough on him. Shifu thinks of you all the time and mentions you often."

Ji Gang folded his hands behind his back. "I've never fought a battle, so I can't offer any help. You must have rushed to get back here. Have you attended to some urgent matter?"

Not yet, Xiao Chiye thought, but he answered aloud, "Since Cizhou has generously given me the Beiyuan Hunting Grounds, I intend to use it as the Imperial Army's home base. I came back to ask Lanzhou about the progress of the construction. Once it's completed, I'll send someone over to take charge."

Ji Gang knew these were all matters the two of them had spoken about at length, so he nodded and didn’t pry further.

It was rare for Xiao Chiye to come across Ji Gang alone, so he seized his chance. “Did Lanzhou fall ill on the way to Chazhou? Shifu, he’s such a picky eater. With you at home keeping an eye on him, he’ll at least taste a little of each dish and take his medicine when he’s ill. But when he’s out traveling, everyone defers to him; without someone watching over him, he only eats what he likes.”

This promptly reminded Ji Gang of his own concerns on this subject. “That’s right! I meant to give him a piece of my mind yesterday!”

“He deflected the topic on purpose.” Xiao Chiye finally left off tormenting Meng and lifted his arm to let him fly off. “He feels guilty. Of course he wishes to keep quiet about it.”

Ji Gang nodded, but something still didn’t feel right. “Why would he feel guilty? Is Chuan-er hiding something else from me?”

“He most certainly is,” Xiao Chiye said with a slight furrow of his brow. “That gash on his left hand is so deep, and the journey back was long; they didn’t change the dressing frequently enough. When I saw it last night, his palm was almost festering.”

The color drained from Ji Gang’s face. “Where is he now?”

“Sleeping.” Xiao Chiye paused for a moment. “He barely slept last night, and he was worn out from traveling. He woke up exhausted this morning. Shifu, you’ll have to keep an eye on him, in case he doesn’t take his health seriously. I’m far away in Libei, and so much of what I hear depends on what he shares in his letters. If he chooses to keep something from me, I’ll be completely in the dark.”

Ji Gang straightened up. “I’ll personally watch him change the dressing.” He thought some more and sighed. “He never recuperated fully during our days in the Temple of Guilt. The physicians we called were a useless lot who couldn’t provide a diagnosis. His body is weaker than others; the more time passes, the more care he must take with his health. You remember, when he entered the capital, he first endured torture in the Imperial Prison and then a flogging, and your kick… What a brutal kick

that was! If not for my old acquaintances in the Embroidered Uniform Guard helping in secret, Chuan-er would be long dead. His health was terribly fragile then, and to keep his abilities hidden, he took that medicine. Now I worry day and night. I'm afraid for him."

Xiao Chiye was quiet a moment. Then, without warning, he lifted the hem of his robe and dropped to his knees. He set both palms squarely on the ground and kowtowed to Ji Gang.

"What are you doing?" asked Ji Gang, stunned.

Xiao Chiye spoke with his head to the ground. "Six years ago, when I rode my horse through Zhongbo, the man I hated the most in the world was Shen Wei. I despised him for abandoning the cities and fleeing, and I was worried the empress dowager would prop up his son as a puppet in the court, so I kicked Lanzhou in Qudu. Shifu is right. It was a brutal kick—one meant to take his life."

Ji Gang choked, momentarily tongue-tied. Afraid Shen Zechuan could hear them from inside, he turned his head away and sighed heavily.

Xiao Chiye continued, "It's my fault Lanzhou is in such ill health today. There are no capable physicians in Zhongbo; I've invited the Venerable Master Yideng to come examine him. At the end of autumn, when the fighting subsides, my shifu will come take his pulse too. I swear I'll take care of Lanzhou, no matter how difficult it might be. I'm stationed far away in Libei, and the delivery of military supplies cannot be delayed—but I feel uneasy when he's out of my sight. What happened in Chazhou cannot keep happening. I have neither family nor close friends in Zhongbo, so I can only ask this of you. Shifu, because of what Lanzhou suffered in his youth, he prefers to keep things to himself. Even when he's injured or in pain, he doesn't say a word. But he considers you his father. As long as you're by his side, he'll take your feelings into consideration and show some regard for his own health. I have no other request; I only ask that you scold him a little, so he'll see the error of his ways—and the next time he does something like this, Shifu, you ought to give me a whipping!"

Ji Gang stood rooted to the spot, stupefied. He felt there was something unusual about these words, yet he couldn't put his finger on

precisely what was wrong with them. He glanced toward the window and heard the light clink of a teacup from the other side of the bamboo blinds. Then all was quiet again.

The frogs in the pond had been fished out, and the courtyard was once again peaceful after dinnertime.

Xiao Chiye, after feeding Snowcrest and Meng and having his own meal, went to have a bath. Shen Zechuan stood under the eaves and cupped a handful of the newly planted orange jasmine. The courtyard was empty save for a low table set with snacks under the eaves, bathed in the evening glow. Shen Zechuan sat down and gazed out into the distance at the setting sun, lost in his thoughts.

Skin damp from his bath, Xiao Chiye walked out and crouched behind Shen Zechuan as he dried his hair. Hand still tugging at the branch of jasmine, Shen Zechuan looked back. Xiao Chiye dipped his head and kissed him. The setting sun was a burnished gold, and the world was silent and still; even the wind considerately left the courtyard to the two of them.

Turning, Shen Zechuan pounced on Xiao Chiye, knocking him to the ground. Leaning back against the door frame, Xiao Chiye hugged him tightly and pressed the tip of his nose to Shen Zechuan’s cheek, saying fiercely, “You’re pressing against my wounded heart.”

Shen Zechuan threw the pieces of crumpled orange jasmine into Xiao Chiye’s pocket and said, “Let me feel it.”

Xiao Chiye did not. He grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan’s wrists and pulled him closer. He was strong and fit, and it didn’t strain him in the slightest to bear Shen Zechuan’s weight. Even the way he sat was carefree and unrestrained, one foot propped on his knee. The two of them sat with their arms around each other as dusk turned to night.

In truth, Xiao Chiye had been dreadfully unhappy for the past half-month.

The Third Sand Camp *his* Imperial Army had retaken had been given to Guo Weili. When Guo Weili had come for the handover, he had bumped

into Gu Jin. Neither could stand the sight of the other, and the soldiers under their command had come to blows more than once. Xiao Chiye swallowed this humiliation and took over Wu Ziyu's position in Border Camp, but arranging the transport and escort of supplies was far more difficult than he had imagined. He was ordered about by the commanding generals of the various camps on the front line; upon return to the Libei homeland, he had to submit a full and detailed report of all his activities to Xiao Jiming; and beyond his work in the military tents, he had to make nice with the civilian merchants from Luoxia Pass and Huaizhou. Often, after drinking with these people through the night, he would have to ride off to another camp before the sun had even risen.

But he had no intention of telling Shen Zechuan any of this.

Xiao Chiye was reminded of a folk song of the Hongyan Mountains; he didn't know the words, so he playfully hummed the melody. Shen Zechuan was asleep, buried in the delicate scent of the jasmine, his head resting against Xiao Chiye's chest and his fingers clutching the front of Xiao Chiye's robe. Xiao Chiye held him, humming until the night grew late and he picked him up to carry him into their room.

Shen Zechuan was still gripping his robe tightly. Xiao Chiye bent over and blew lightly on his fingers, then crouched down and watched him for a moment before saying, "I'm still angry, you know."

Opening his eyes a sliver, Shen Zechuan poked Xiao Chiye's cheek and whispered, "Don't be."

"All you do is lie to me, you…" Xiao Chiye was momentarily at a loss for words. "Is Er-gongzi so easy to deceive? Bullying a pure and innocent young master; you're really something, you know."

Shen Zechuan rolled over onto his stomach and faced Xiao Chiye, nose to nose.

Damn it, those eyes.

Xiao Chiye swallowed his indignation. He pinched Shen Zechuan's cheeks and said hoarsely, "Go on, keep acting cute with me. It's futile, Shen Lanzhou. If you get yourself stabbed again, I will promptly perish in Libei. I won't exist anymore, you hear me?"

Shen Zechuan nodded obligingly.

Xiao Chiye leaned closer and pressed his forehead to Shen Zechuan's. "I have to go."

Shen Zechuan didn't let go. "When will you be back?"

Xiao Chiye didn't know. He stroked Shen Zechuan's cheek. "Soon. I have so much still to do now, but the war should slow down once autumn rolls around."

It was already midnight. Shen Zechuan released his grip and gazed at Xiao Chiye.

Never had Xiao Chiye felt standing up to be so difficult. He swiftly put on his armguard and let down the bed curtain. Finally, he lowered his hand and brushed the tip of Shen Zechuan's nose with a finger. "Sleep well, Lanzhou."

Snowcrest galloped out of the city in the dark of night, with Meng following Xiao Chiye as they soared northward, toward the skies of Libei.

Chen Yang would come meet him mid-journey. Xiao Chiye had to head north to deliver supplies to the battlefields immediately; after reaching Border Camp, he would be able to close his eyes only an hour or two before his work began anew.

As Xiao Chiye was riding out of Cizhou, a donkey trotted across the border of Zhongbo.

This donkey was carrying a man slumped across its back; whether he was dead or alive was anyone's guess. A few hungry meows came from within the opening of his sleeve. The man opened his eyes with great difficulty, looked at the pitch-dark road ahead of him, and closed them once again.

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Chapter 145:
Beggar

SEVERAL DAYS later, the new garrison troops of Cizhou escorted a caravan of grain wagons into Chazhou. Fei Sheng returned from Chazhou, gave Shen Zechuan a full report of the happenings there, and handed over his records of the prices of goods in Huaizhou and Fanzhou. On top of that, in the time he'd been away, he had even gotten to the bottom of Lei Changming and Lei Jingzhe's backgrounds.

Lei Changming was a native of Chazhou who had gotten his start as an armed escort; this much was common knowledge. Fei Sheng had made inquiries all over Chazhou with help from the shopkeepers in Juexi; according to some of the older people in Chazhou who'd been around long enough to witness it, Lei Changming had been making money in the flesh trade as early as the reign of Yongyi. Back then, both Dunzhou and Duanzhou saw a proliferation of entertainment houses across their territories, heralding the rise of famous courtesans like Bai Cha, Shen Zechuan's mother. Lei Changming had scoured the lands of Dengzhou, tricking naive women and selling them into these establishments as prostitutes. Later, Shen Wei ordered the closure of the brothels along the banks of the Chashi River, sending the businesses in Duanzhou into a drastic decline. Lei Changming had no connections at the checkpoint leading into Duanzhou, and was forced to make his living elsewhere.

After scraping by for a time, Lei Changming thought to resume his old trade. He capitalized on the reputation of the Zhu family, to whom he had married his younger sister, and went around making connections with officials in Zhongbo. The more he rubbed elbows, the more he noticed that these people dreaded the time in spring every year when the Chief Surveillance Bureau would make trips out to the various regions to conduct inspections and audits. The imperial censors had the authority to impeach, and thus the reviews of any officials involved would doubtless be affected by what the censors found. This was an important affair pertaining to their

future promotions and placements; as such, they didn't dare do anything as rash as visit brothels at this time.

This gave Lei Changming an idea. He set up an establishment called Mingshu Hall—the Hall of Famed Tomes—in Fanzhou, a poetry club and teahouse on the surface. In actuality, he sent the decent women he collected to work there as prostitutes to bribe the various officials of Zhongbo.

This business didn't last long, either, before Shen Wei's people shuttered it.

At this point in the record, Fei Sheng had made a note in the margin: Shen Wei had placed spies and informers everywhere throughout the various prefectures. After marrying Bai Cha, he became more heavy-handed in his attempts to crush the brothels across Zhongbo. Lei Changming's Mingshu Hall hadn't been open a year before Shen Wei wiped it off the map. Abducting and trafficking women of decent backgrounds was a crime punishable by law. To escape responsibility, Lei Changming left behind a subordinate to take the fall for him while he rushed to Dunzhou, where he offered Shen Wei a fortune in gold and silver in order to extricate himself.

After this incident, Lei Changming returned to his old ways of idling about doing nothing. He'd married at some point, but his wife and son passed early, and he didn't take a concubine. He had acquired a taste for assaulting children from his trafficking days, but he was too rough with them, and none of them survived for long. Toward the end of the reign of Yongyi, Lei Changming took a job with the Yan Clan of Hezhou as an armed escort and subsequently got into the Yan Clan's good graces. It was at this point that he began to enjoy a meteoric rise.

There was no mention of a jade bead or earring in this record. Shen Zechuan closed the report and contemplated for a moment. "It's strange. Children who wear earrings are either wealthy or noble. Even if Lei Changming was comfortable trafficking women and children from normal families in Zhongbo, he wouldn't have dared lay a finger on any of the heirs of the Eight Great Clans of Qudu."

"Master has guessed right. I heard whispers of this during my inquiries, but didn't wish to include it in the report without evidence, so I'll

elaborate now.” Fei Sheng stood beside the table and turned back to look at Li Xiong in the courtyard. “I spoke to that lad, too, and I can more or less guess what happened. During the reign of Yongyi, Lei Changming saved the young master of the Yan Clan, Yan Heru. As a boy, he did indeed wear an earring. He was a pretty child too, said to be fair and delicate, the apple of the Yan Clan’s eye. Lei Changming brought Young Master Yan back with him and, well, as Master has witnessed, this man was an animal. He almost certainly harbored foul intentions toward Young Master Yan.”

Shen Zechuan snapped his folding fan shut.

“But he didn’t dare lay a hand on the boy,” Fei Sheng continued. “It just so happened that a member of the Shao Clan serving in the Ministry of War was imprisoned at the time, and all the male descendants of the clan were sentenced to execution. In order to preserve their bloodline, the old matriarch of the Shao Clan disguised the last grandson of lawful birth as a girl. This grandson was exiled and sent to do hard labor in Zhongbo, where he was unlucky enough to fall into the hands of Lei Changming.”

At this moment, Qiao Tianya, who had seemingly covered his face with a book to nap, sat up. “The Shao Clan? A member of the Shao Clan in the Ministry of War during the reign of Yongyi—you mean the vice minister, Shao Chengbi?!”

Fei Sheng clapped his hands. “Right. That’s the one. You know him?”

Qiao Tianya leapt to his feet, momentarily stunned. “Of course I know him. Master, I’ve told you before that I’m a son of the Qiao Clan, who also served in the Ministry of War. Shao Chengbi and my father were fast friends. Not only that, Shao Chengbi was an official personally promoted by Grand Mentor Qi himself. But he wasn’t a sociable fellow, so he hardly interacted with the grand mentor. He went on to marry the elder sister of the current Minister of War, Chen Zhen. Thanks to this connection, he had a narrow escape when everyone in the Eastern Palace was hunted down and was spared the empress dowager’s efforts to exterminate the crown prince’s faction.”

Fei Sheng nodded. “That much is true. But Shao Chengbi wasn’t friendly with the Hua and Pan factions either. To rid himself of Shao

Chengbi, Hua Siqian convinced Ji Lei to use the Embroidered Uniform Guard to frame Shao Chengbi as a participant in the Eastern Palace's treason, ensuring that all his family's possessions and properties would be confiscated and sealed off. This was near the end of the Yongyi years."

Now Shen Zechuan understood. Lei Changming didn't dare lay his hands on the young Yan Heru, so he had abused the lawful grandson of the Shao Clan in the boy's place.

"The lawful grandson of the Shao Clan was older than Yan Heru at the time," Fei Sheng noted, "but even so, he was only nine that year, and had been doted on by his family. Before the old matriarch met her end, she pleaded with all her old acquaintances to smuggle the child out of Qudu. No one could've foreseen that he would be captured by Lei Changming upon arriving in Zhongbo. Lei Changming was brutal with the children he took. For one, he was known to drink before doing the deed, which killed what little restraint he had. But secondly, he was wary of loose ends. Drag the dead child out and bury him, and the matter would be done with. It was Cai Yu who began asking around and found out about this. If I had to guess, this is also the reason behind Lei Changming's falling-out with the Yan Clan."

This was the first assignment Fei Sheng had handled for Shen Zechuan, and he was determined to do a flawless job. After wrapping up his findings on Lei Changming, he gave his detailed report on Luo Mu of Chazhou. Shen Zechuan glanced at Qiao Tianya as he listened, noting the man's distraction.

Before Fei Sheng took his leave, he spared Qiao Tianya a few words between the changing of shifts as he washed his hands.

"You don't need to ask." Fei Sheng rinsed the space between his fingers clean. "Anything I learned regarding the lawful grandson of the Shao Clan came from the bandits in Chazhou. I'm sure you already know this, but that child was nowhere as important as Yan Heru—who would remember his fate all these years later? Eight or nine out of ten of the children who fell into Lei Changming's hands wound up dead, and even if they didn't…" Fei Sheng sighed with a complex mix of emotions. "How could they go on?"

Qiao Tianya made a show of shrugging his shoulders. “Did I ask? I wasn’t going to ask.”

Fei Sheng looked at him in disdain and gestured with a finger at the minimal distance between them. “See this? The only reason you would waltz over here is if you had something to ask me. It’s been years since it all happened. If it bothers you, you can imagine he’s still alive.”

“There is no imagining.” Qiao Tianya took a few strides down the steps and clasped his hands behind his head, squinting against the sunlight. He spoke with an air of nonchalance. “If he’s dead, he’s dead. Lying six feet under is far more comfortable than scrabbling about up here.”

The end of the seventh month was just a few days off, whereupon wagons of grain would leave Cizhou and return with wagons of silver. Autumn was around the corner, and Zhou Gui worried the grain in Huaizhou would be bought up by others before they could make their purchase. Now that the money was as good as in their hands, Zhou Gui began consulting with his advisors—the business with Huaizhou needed to be settled as soon as possible.

Shen Zechuan joined them in the study for the meeting. After listening for a time, he asked only one question: “What does Mister Chengfeng think?”

Kong Ling hesitated before speaking. “As I said to my lord last night, sending our people to Huaizhou right now is too hasty. I don’t believe it’s a good idea.”

Zhou Gui, who was sitting in a lesser position beside Shen Zechuan, nodded. “Chengfeng did indeed share this opinion when we were discussing the details last night. But Vice Commander, parts of Juexi were struck by natural disasters this year, and the Provincial Administration Commissioner, Jiang Qingshan, has also been transferred away from the region. The areas suffering food shortages will have to purchase grain from other prefectures. Huaizhou is close to Qudu, and the autumn harvest is around the corner. I worry Juexi will ink a deal with them before we do.”

Zhou Gui's worries were not unfounded. The granaries Cizhou had emptied to conduct this trade with Chazhou were Cizhou's emergency stores; Zhou Gui couldn't help but be anxious as he contemplated entering winter with a warehouse full of silver instead of grain.

Over the past few days, Shen Zechuan had been planning a trip to Huaizhou. Yet he hesitated, not only for fear of acting too hastily, but also because Qudu still had yet to issue transfer papers for Jiang Qingshan. Regardless of whether he was sent back to Juexi or assigned somewhere else, Jiang Qingshan's placement would affect Cizhou's trade deals. If Jiang Qingshan was deployed to Huaizhou, whatever dealings they managed to secure with the official presiding there would likely be null and void.

Shen Zechuan was in a quandary. "Your Excellency and Mister Chengfeng's concerns are not without merit. I too have been pondering the issue of Huaizhou for the last few days. If we're to follow our original plan, it would be better to make this deal as soon as possible. But as things stand, we must also consider how to avoid Qudu's scrutiny."

Kong Ling nodded in agreement. "Just so—our silver wagons must travel on Libei's roads, and though he probably won't stop us, we'll need the Heir of Libei's permission for passage. We're borrowing the roads of the Libei Armored Cavalry and converting this silver to grain to replenish their supplies as well, so for now, Libei will be all too happy to oblige. But one thing still worries me: How do we get by Luoxia Pass? The Luoxia Pass Garrison Troops remain under direct control of Qudu, and they lack for neither grain nor money. Libei has a history with them and shares some rapport, but Cizhou does not. What do we do?"

Given Shen Zechuan's relationship with Xiao Chiye, if it truly came down to it, he could probably ask a favor from Luoxia Pass that relied on the chain of friendly ties. But this option was built on the assumption that Xiao Fangxu and Xiao Jiming were willing to acknowledge Shen Zechuan's involvement with their son and brother. Otherwise, relying on Xiao Chiye alone… With apologies, the second young master didn't yet have that much prestige.

In asking this question, Kong Ling was tactfully conveying that they were not *that* close to Libei. If even borrowing the roads of Libei resulted in

a favor owed, borrowing their troops in the future was by no means a sure thing. When Xiao Chiye had first arrived in Cizhou, Zhou Gui and Kong Ling had presumed he was going back to succeed his father and elder brother and carve out his own distinguished career—but if news from Libei was to be believed, Xiao Chiye was presently lower in rank than any of the commanding generals on the battlefield. It wasn't that a general in charge of supplies wasn't important, but there was simply no comparison when it came to reputation, prestige, or advancement.

They remained talking in the study until dusk, but failed to reach a conclusion.

When Shen Zechuan returned to his manor, he found Ding Tao and Li Xiong waiting to receive him at the entrance.

Ding Tao hadn't returned to Libei, nor was he included in any of the guard rotations; he spent his days practicing shadowboxing at Ji Gang's side with Li Xiong. They trained in the morning and were idle in the afternoon, and so the two of them ran wild, playing to their hearts' content for the entirety of the seventh month. Ding Tao was no longer upset about being left behind in Cizhou, and he had forgotten all about Chen Yang and Gu Jin. There was no one to nag him when he ate sweets at night, and it was only when he got a toothache that Qiao Tianya took time to scold him.

"Gongzi, there are quite a number of beggars in the city today," Ding Tao commented, tagging along behind Shen Zechuan. "They're skin and bones from starvation. People are saying they came from Dancheng. Lord Yu went out in the morning to buy a whole sack of steamed buns, and a fight broke out over them."

Shen Zechuan paused in his steps. Seeing that the sky was still bright, he said to Qiao Tianya, "Let's go take a look."

Cizhou had just started reorganizing its household register. Newly arrived migrants were instructed to present themselves at the prefectural yamen to report their name and place of origin, a measure designed to prevent roving bandits from sneaking into the city. Zhou Gui had assigned clerks to handle the registration, but Shen Zechuan's interest was piqued at the mention of Dancheng; he wanted to see it in person.

Upon arrival, they spotted Yu Xiaozai handing out steamed buns, just as Ding Tao had described. Fei Sheng and Qiao Tianya stepped forward to help, and Yu Xiaozai thanked them repeatedly.

“Youjing.” Shen Zechuan spoke gently. “Bring them to the yamen; there will be people there giving out steamed buns and porridge. There’s no need for you to feed them out of your own pocket.”

Yu Xiaozai had come to Cizhou on foot with hardly a copper to his name. He’d lost his official position and was unwilling to work for Zhou Gui, so he’d remained in Shen Zechuan’s manor, relying on his charity. He lived minimally, and earned a small amount providing literary services to others. Now, the few taels of silver he’d managed to save up had all been exchanged for steamed buns.

“There are only so many rations the yamen can distribute every day,” Yu Xiaozai said. “Most of those who come late in the day are the old, weak, sick, or widowed. It’s too pitiable for them to go hungry. In any case, money is merely a worldly possession.”

Shen Zechuan found something suspicious about this influx of migrants. Dancheng was one of the eight cities surrounding Qudu. They’d encountered no natural disasters this year; in fact, they’d provided supplies to Han Jin’s Eight Great Battalions. The Imperial Army had enjoyed a feast when they passed by the city. How could there suddenly be so many migrants from there?

Qiao Tianya was handing out steamed buns to the commoners one at a time when he heard a commotion behind him.

Shen Zechuan looked over and saw several ruffians cursing as they tried to pull away another man’s donkey. Seeing Shen Zechuan’s impassive expression, Fei Sheng promptly gathered up another handful of steamed buns and waved the Embroidered Uniform Guard forward to break up the fight.

“What are you doing over there making such a racket?!” he yelled.

One of the ruffians had seen the Embroidered Uniform Guard at work before. As he was hauled away with both legs dragging on the ground, he blurted in panic, “My good sirs, we’re not the ones at fault! These guys said

they wanted to sell the donkey, but they wouldn't give it to me after I paid up! Tell me, isn't this a scam?!"

At this, Fei Sheng turned and rebuked the men. "Don't you even check who's in charge here before trying to swindle people in broad daylight? Give him the donkey!"

The band of unkempt men timidly tugged the beast a few steps on the rope halter and stuffed the end into Fei Sheng's hands. The donkey brayed, objecting to such handling. From behind the cluster of men, a lone hand slapped the ground, murmuring, "That's my donkey…"

Fei Sheng had sharp ears, but he didn't want to complicate the issue any further; he pretended not to have heard. One of the ruffians stomped on the hand so hard it clenched into a fist from the pain and pounded on the ground to object, but in the next moment, someone must've pulled the hand's owner from behind, because it vanished from sight.

As Fei Sheng handed the donkey over to the man who claimed to have bought it, he felt a slight weight on his shoe. He looked down and saw a kitten covered in dirt. Scooping it up, Fei Sheng called, "Tao-zi, a little playma—"

Yet before Fei Sheng could finish, that hand appeared out of the crowd again, exposing only the tips of its fingers. It clawed at the ground until bloody mud darkened the edges of its nails.

"My…my cat!"

A man crawled over, his forehead scraping the ground as he struggled forward. The ruffian behind him saw Fei Sheng turn and hurriedly dragged the man back by the ankles to try to hide him from view.

Now that Fei Sheng was looking, he could see the man's legs were in a terrible state—as if someone had broken both of them.

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Chapter 146:
Yuanzhuo

"DING TAO," Shen Zechuan said suddenly.

Ding Tao tucked his notebook away and leapt over the fray to grab the arm of the nearest ruffian. "What are you hiding? Move away so our young master can see."

Noting their shifting eyes and their hemming and hawing, Fei Sheng thundered, "What? Is this donkey not yours?"

The sharp-eyed Ding Tao yelled, "Gongzi, there's a man on the ground!"

The men from the Embroidered Uniform Guard stepped forward and surrounded the whole tableau. Most of these men were local thugs from Dancheng; they cowered when they saw the hostile expressions of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, their fear heightened by the blades displayed at their sides. Before Fei Sheng could give any further orders, the rogues dispersed, revealing a man lying on the ground.

Yu Xiaozai lifted the hem of his robe and stepped in closer for a look. Bending over, he exclaimed in shock, "Why is there so much blood? Quick, help this man up and call for a physician!"

Fei Sheng squatted down. "His legs can't be saved. Someone broke them."

The man didn't lift his eyes from the ground. He struggled to prop himself on his elbows long enough to rasp, "The cat is mine."

Embarrassed, Fei Sheng put the little cat down before the man, explaining, "I thought it was a stray. Is this donkey yours too? You're not from Dancheng, are you?"

The man didn't answer; he dropped his head and started coughing. As he covered his lips, Fei Sheng caught a glimpse of the handkerchief in his hand. Though it was dirty, it was an exquisite piece; the quality and material were not something a commoner could afford. The fingers holding it, too,

were long and slender, without calluses. This was not the hand of a man who performed manual labor.

Fei Sheng's attitude changed instantly. "Sir, let me help you up. You can't walk on these legs of yours, and you're in such a bad way. We need to have a physician look at you as soon as possible."

The man clenched his fists, and his coughing intensified. The handkerchief was stained with blood. He was injured and wretched, yet his etiquette was impeccable. With his eyes still lowered, he said, "I wouldn't dare put you to the trouble. Thank you for offering."

Yu Xiaozai saw the flat pouch hanging from the man's waist and knew this stranger to be a scholar. His concern only grew as he turned to Shen Zechuan. "Vice Commander Shen, he doesn't seem to be a wicked person to me. Why don't we—"

"Vice Commander Shen?" The man's tone suddenly changed. "Shen Zechuan?"

The surrounding Embroidered Uniform Guard promptly gripped the hilts of their sabers. Shen Zechuan gestured for them to back down. "Are we acquainted?"

The man seemed suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. He tried to speak, but merely coughed up more blood. His throat bobbed, and his coughing worsened as his pale, trembling fingers curled in the dirt, gouging desperate tracks as he murmured over and over, "Shen Zechuan, it's you!"

Qiao Tianya turned; he was sure he'd heard this voice before.

Shen Zechuan slowly crouched and looked into the man's face. The beggar moved the handkerchief covering his mouth and, with great effort, propped himself up on his elbows. His eyes seemed to blaze, filled with the madness of someone staking everything on a single cast of the dice. He lifted his head. Instead of wailing or breaking into hysterics as everyone seemed to expect, he let out a whisper-soft laugh. That laugh was like the ripple of spring water, fleeting and ephemeral, before it was quickly subsumed in the crackle of an endless inferno. This man had been swallowed by a raging fire that consumed his unbending pride and free

spirit along with everything else in his life, turning an immortal free from worldly cares into a pile of blackened ash.

At last, Qiao Tianya recognized him.

He carried still that misty memory of two kindred spirits playing the qin under the willows in a soft green spring; now, that upright, spring-green young master had fallen into ruin: filthy, alone, and unable even to walk. Just like that, the unpolished jade Hai Liangyi and the Yao Clan had cherished and safeguarded for half a lifetime had been ground into the mud.

Qiao Songyue was suddenly at a loss. He felt instinctively that he shouldn't continue staring at Yao Wenyu like this, but yet again, he saw himself in this man. Both of them had once lived as immortals of the Moon Palace—as remote and lofty as the goddess who presided there. Qiao Songyue had fallen: That dashing, fan-holding young master of a prominent clan had turned into the blade-wielding, jaded Qiao Tianya. He had thought their chance encounter fleeting serendipity; he never expected that a scant half a year later, they would meet again as fellow sufferers commiserating in the same misfortune.

The word *commiserate* was truly an agonizing one.

Qiao Tianya hastily averted his gaze and didn't dare look again until Yao Wenyu was helped away.

It had grown late, and the lights left burning in the house provided only a dim glow. The physician's apprentice came out with the prescription in hand, and Fei Sheng accepted it, then turned it over to his subordinate to collect the ingredients. The guards were all clustered in the corridor; Ding Tao, unusually well-behaved, cradled the kitten.

Fei Sheng forced a smile and said to Qiao Tianya, "Who would have expected to find him like this? He…"

What was there for him to say?

Legends of Unpolished Jade Yuanzhuo, Yao Wenyu, had circulated for years in Qudu; in all of them, this man was hailed as a fallen immortal —a wayward genius living among men. Even Fei Sheng, who had never

rubbed elbows with the literati, knew him as a household name. Who could have imagined the free and unfettered wanderer of those breathless stories would be reduced to scrabbling in the dirt? He was in a more miserable state than even Yu Xiaozai had been when he arrived half-dead in Cizhou.

Yu Xiaozai had already wept once while the physician was working, and now he was facing the wall, overwhelmed with grief as he said around his sobs, “How…how can they ever answer for this to the Grand Secretary?!”

Fei Sheng consoled him stiffly, “The ways of the world are unpredictable. Youjing, take care; you’ll make yourself ill carrying on like this.”

Qiao Tianya leaned against a pillar in the corridor, face hidden in shadow. He didn’t say a word.

They hadn’t stood for long when Kong Ling walked the physician out and beckoned them over. Qiao Tianya hung back to ask the physician a few questions. The physician answered him truthfully; Qiao Tianya fell silent for a few moments, then turned aside to let an attendant walk the physician to the gates.

Bamboo blinds had been drawn down in the room and blocked out some of the candlelight. A screen partitioned the room in two. Shen Zechuan sat on one side, speaking to Zhou Gui in hushed tones. On seeing the guards enter, he said, “Fei Sheng, you’re on night watch. Ding Tao, go back to your courtyard and sleep. There’s no need to worry, Youjing; the kitchen is brewing the medicine as we speak.”

Yu Xiaozai sat on the edge of his seat. After a moment of silence, he began, “Is Yao-gongzi…”

Kong Ling was a perceptive and empathetic man; he knew it would be better not to discuss the details here. Bemoaning Yao Wenyu’s fate or showing him pity was, to Yao Wenyu, torture by a thousand cuts. He got to his feet to lead Yu Xiaozai away. “It’s already late, Youjing. Yao-gongzi has only just arrived; let him rest for a night. It won’t be too late for us to come visit him again tomorrow.”

With that, he turned back to bow toward Shen Zechuan and addressed Zhou Gui: “We still have some matters to discuss in the study later tonight. Your Excellency, let’s walk out together.”

At this gentle reminder from Kong Ling, Yu Xiaozai followed suit and rose to take his leave. Before he left, he cast a final glance at the inner room and saw the shadows of the trees intercutting the flickering gloom from the candlelight. The man within was silent. He thought again of Hai Liangyi, and his eyes burned. Holding back a long sigh, he hurried across the threshold.

The night air was chilly, and the veil the moonlight cast over the flowers and plants in the courtyard made them appear sickly and listless. The wind chimes hanging under the eaves swayed gently with the wind, the metal clappers clanging against the sides. Yao Wenyu lay on the bed, his consciousness scattering with the sound of the chimes. As his mind drifted, he returned to Qudu.

Misty rain pervaded the capital city. Yao Wenyu, draped in mourning attire, had sent Hai Liangyi to his final rest on Mount Bodhi. This mountain was the burial site of Yao Wenyu’s paternal grandfather, and now, it was the burial site of his own teacher. He stood in the drizzle, unable to see the green of the mountain and unable to find the way back.

The Yao Clan had produced many scholars of great talent for the nation. They had been a bold and vigorous force in successive reigns of the Zhou empire, the scholarly mainstay within the high walls of the noble clans. During the Guangcheng Emperor’s reign, Old Master Yao had cast aside the clan’s traditions and renounced the old prejudices against family status. He reached out to the descendants of common households who were denied opportunities elsewhere, and the Imperial College flourished. The Yao Clan began exploring a different path, yet this path had come to a premature end at the hands of the empress dowager Hua Hewei and her brother Hua Siqian. By Yao Wenyu’s father’s generation, the Yao Clan was in decline. Although they retained their prestige and influence, it was no longer what it had been during Old Master Yao’s time. The nail in the coffin was the Yao Clan’s dearth of descendants in this generation—they only had one son, Yao Wenyu. The rest were all descendants from collateral branches

of the clan, and not a single one had distinguished themselves in the spring imperial examinations.

In recent years, the eight clans had all undergone a change in heads and members, and the Yao Clan no longer commanded the same level of respect from the other seven. Most of the young members of the Yao Clan who did serve as officials held sinecures with practically no real responsibilities; none were third-rank ministers in esteemed positions like the men of the Wei Clan. Although Yao Wenyu was a student under Hai Liangyi and friends with many of the literati, he held no official position, nor had he married Commandery Princess Zhaoyue of the Fei Clan as everyone expected. Other than the extraordinary literary talent for which he was renowned, he had nothing at all to his name. In the end, even his reputation had forsaken him. He was like the falling leaves on this mountain reduced to dirt in the changing of seasons: utterly worthless.

Qiao Tianya lifted the bamboo blinds and stepped back to let Shen Zechuan inside. Shen Zechuan sat in the chair the physician had previously occupied for his examination. As the candlelight flickered, he spoke.

“You’ve been poisoned. It won’t do for you to continue living out there, exposed to the elements. If it’s agreeable to you, you can stay in my home. My teacher and yours viewed each other as colleagues, and you are old friends with Ce’an. There’s no need for you to stand on ceremony.”

Yao Wenyu’s freshly washed face was as calm as a still lake as he listened to the wind chimes outside. After several moments, he answered, “You needn’t be so tactful. I came to Cizhou to seek refuge under your leadership, Vice Commander.”

Shen Zechuan rested his folding fan on his knees. “At the moment, I’m relying on others’ charity myself. I’d only be so bold as to call you a brother; I couldn’t presume to be your master.”

“It seems Cizhou has you to thank for its revival, Vice Commander.” Yao Wenyu started coughing again.

The consecutive traumas inflicted upon his body had been meant to kill him. He was a scholar, not a soldier; eradicating the lingering malady that had taken root in him would be difficult, if not impossible. He was

terribly ill, and much thinner than he'd been half a year ago. He clutched his handkerchief, covering his mouth for a moment before continuing. "I heard about the vice commander's exploits on my journey here. You aren't making a grab for the six prefectures of Zhongbo—you seek to obtain Qudu itself. Once you've established trade routes with Chazhou and Huaizhou, Cizhou will have direct access to Libei's trade market in the northeast, and you can keep the grain routes of Qidong in check in the southeast. Two major military forces of Great Zhou will have to pass under the vice commander's eyes. How they fight and when they fight will all lie in your hands."

Shen Zechuan nudged open his folding fan with his fingertips and set it on the armrest of the chair but said nothing.

"What's more, this trade route is unique in your geographical position. If the vice commander decides to establish a township along this route, you will effectively secure Qudu's north, south, and east sides. The Eight Great Battalions have limited military strength; by then, it will prove impossible for Qudu to break through your siege on three sides without assistance from Qidong." Yao Wenyu cast a sidelong glance at Shen Zechuan. "The vice commander is a visionary man, planning now for years down the road."

Shen Zechuan pinned his gaze on Yao Wenyu.

If not for the fact that this man was in such a pathetic state after his attempted murder, Shen Zechuan himself might have taken his life. He had prepared countless explanations for others regarding the trade routes between the prefectures of Cizhou, Chazhou, and Huaizhou, but Yao Wenyu had easily divined his true motive: cut Qudu off from its direct route northeast to Libei, while using Chazhou to contain Hezhou and obstruct Qidong's supply routes in the south. Yao Wenyu was right—Shen Zechuan wanted to surround Qudu.

"Qi Zhuyin might not give you time." Yao Wenyu couldn't suppress his coughing, covering his mouth with a handkerchief again and again. "She's watching every move you make from Qidong; she'll see through it eventually. If this gamble of yours is successful, all's well that ends well. But if it fails, you'll be trapped between Qudu and Qidong. When your

enemies come knocking on two fronts, even if Libei is willing to deploy troops to help you, they cannot hold off the Biansha Horsemen and fight the garrison troops of Qidong simultaneously. Your current lack of military might is the fatal chink in your armor. That's why you're set on connecting Cizhou and Chazhou, re-organizing the household registers, and taking in migrants—for the sake of quickly establishing an army under *your* command."

Shen Zechuan snapped his fan shut and said with a smile, "Yao Yuanzhuo's reputation is truly well-deserved. But with your brilliance, how did you end up wandering in Zhongbo? If you wish to accomplish great things, the climate in Qudu now could not be better. Whether it's the empress dowager or the Grand Secretariat, all of them are better able to afford your talents than I, Shen Lanzhou."

Yao Wenyu struggled to sit up. Qiao Tianya stepped forward to help him, putting a pillow behind his back for support. Yao Wenyu didn't once glance at Qiao Tianya, as though he didn't recognize him. Long fingers clutching his handkerchief, he turned his head aside and coughed again. The muffled sound persisted for a very long time. He stared at the shadows dancing over the wall and rasped, "Xue Yanqing, in his support for the heir apparent, coerced the Grand Secretariat and the empress dowager and schemed to lead the Imperial College into pushing for reforms in Qudu.

"But it is my belief that Great Zhou is already beyond remedy; rather than continue to make incremental changes for the sake of restoration, why not tear it down and rebuild from scratch? The throne sits empty; the Zhou empire has lost its deer, and all under heaven may chase after it. Even a commoner like Lei Changming had the ambition to crown himself king. By the time Qudu's reforms are put to action, people from across the land will surely rise in rebellion. The fight for the crown is a foregone conclusion. The imperial Li Clan is powerless against the will of the heavens."

Yao Wenyu turned back and studied Shen Zechuan through the dimming light; the fire that had rekindled in his eyes burned with complex emotions. He said slowly and deliberately: "Anyone in the world can sit on the throne. The Li Clan could. So why not you, Shen Zechuan?"

Shen Zechuan held his folded fan before him and replied coldly, “My aspirations lie elsewhere.”

“You can’t fool me,” Yao Wenyu said, voice low. “You are walking this path already.”

“Perhaps I’ll help someone else onto the throne.” Shen Zechuan smiled. “There is more than one person in this world with the surname Li.”

“When Zhongbo fell six years ago, you lost everything. Six years later, you suffered defeat in Qudu and lost it all again. In another six years…” Yao Wenyu’s lowered eyes were distant. “Will you still be willing to place your life and destiny in the hands of another? You are completely unsuited to be an obedient servant of the state. Being subjected to the control of others has already become the greatest indignity of your life. You won’t stand for it again.”

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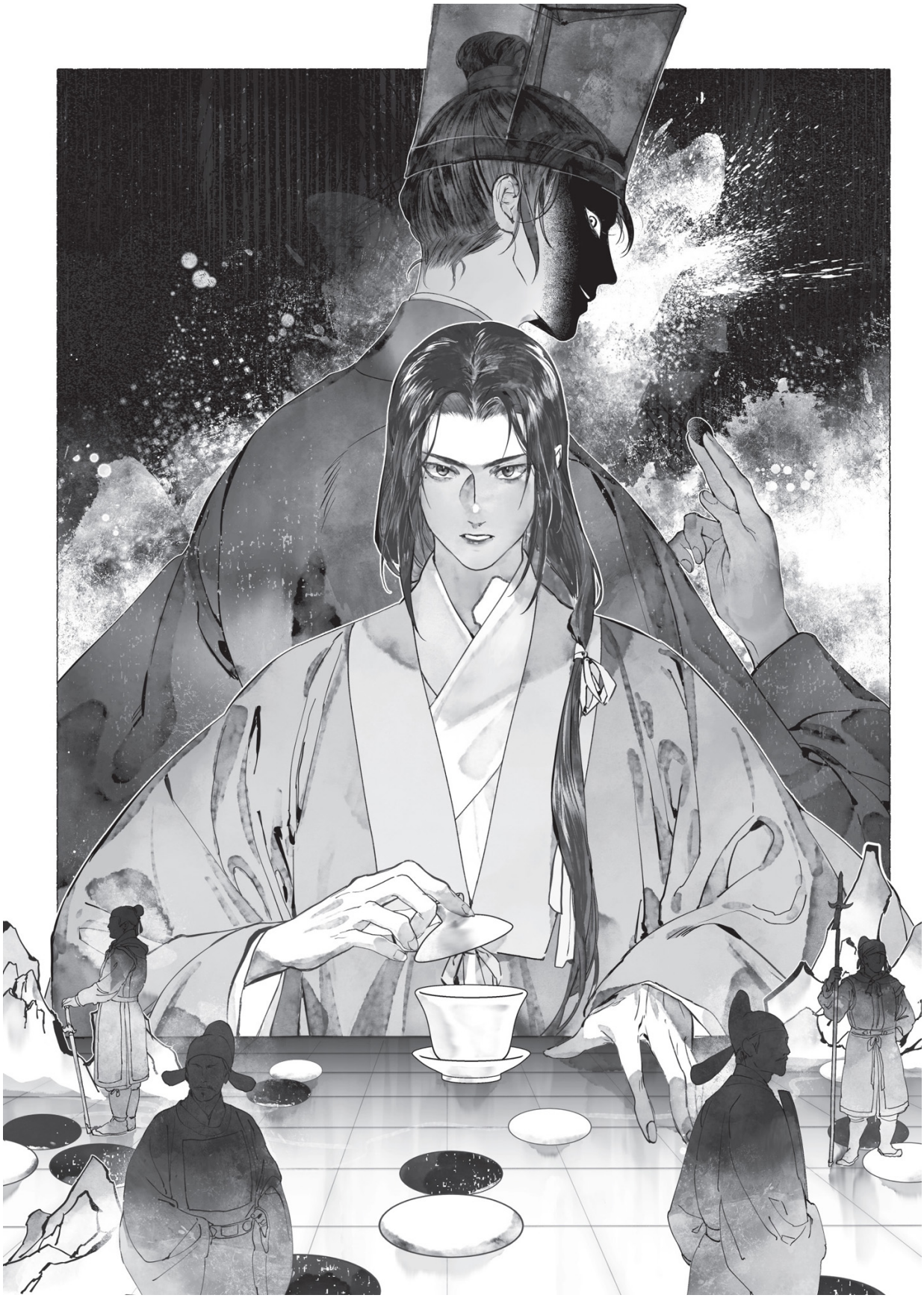

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The atmosphere within the room shifted abruptly. Shen Zechuan grasped his folding fan. Although he was quiet, he looked as though he could kill the man before him in a heartbeat, without a single qualm. His expressive eyes betrayed nothing. The wind chimes outside the window tinkled, and bleak shadows of rustling trees fell upon the edge of his robes, disappearing beneath his feet.

Shen Zechuan smiled. “Since Xiansheng is willing to play for my team, then there is nothing we may not discuss. Qiao Tianya, serve the tea.”

Yao Wenyu accepted the tea and skimmed the surface with the lid, but did not drink. His wrist was the same pale color as the teacup, but it was piteously thin and frail. He gazed at the floating tea leaves and said, self-mocking, “No need to call me Xiansheng. I lost to Xue Xiuzhuo in Qudu, had both my legs broken, and nearly lost my life. Didn’t you ask me why I came here?”

He was silent for a while. “Because win or lose, live or die, I will finish this game of chess with Xue Xiuzhuo.”

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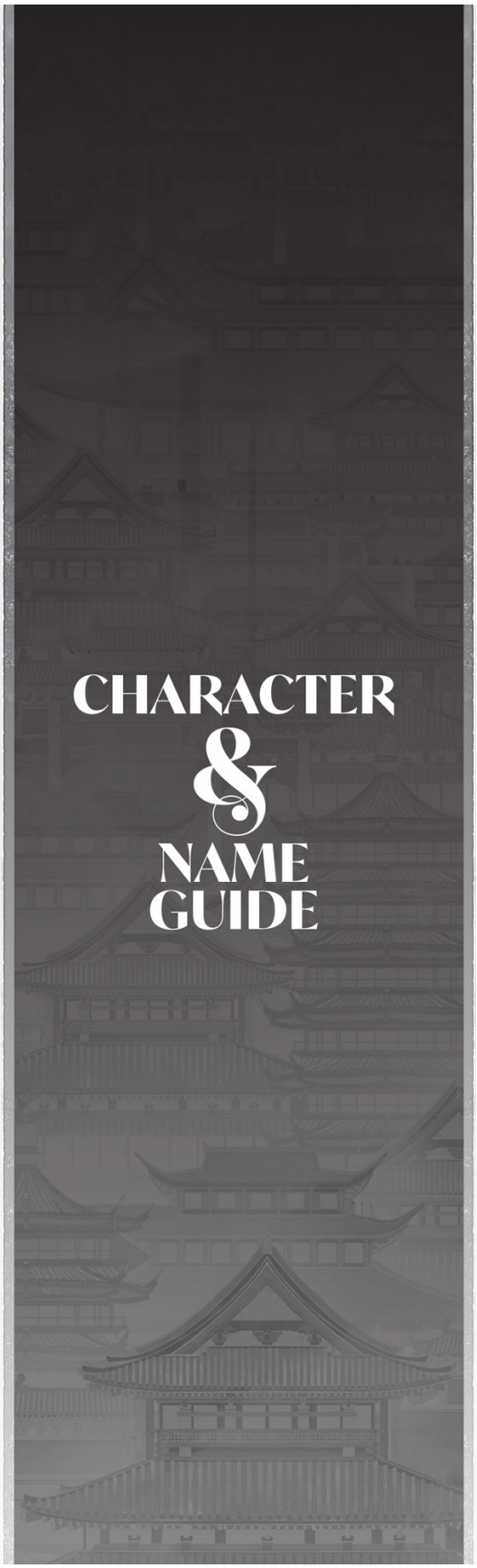
CHARACTER
&
NAME
GUIDE

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Characters

Main Characters

SHEN ZECHUAN

SURNAME SHEN; GIVEN NAME ZECHUAN, "TO NOURISH THE RIVERS"

COURTESY NAME: Lanzhou (/ orchid; boat)

TITLE: Vice Commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard

WEAPON: Avalanche (/ Yang Shan Xue): A straight, single-edged saber longer than normal swords. It used to belong to Ji Gang's adoptive father.

The eighth son of common birth to Shen Wei, the Prince of Jianxing. Due to his father's alleged collusion with the enemy during the invasion of Zhongbo that led to the slaughter of thirty thousand soldiers in the Chashi Sinkhole, he was sentenced to imprisonment and was obligated to pay his father's debt as the last surviving member of the Shen Clan.

XIAO CHIYE

SURNAME XIAO; GIVEN NAME CHIYE, "TO RIDE ACROSS THE WILD"

COURTESY NAME: Ce'an (/ spur; peace)

TITLE: Supreme Commander of the Imperial Army and Marquis of Dingdu

WEAPON: Wolfsfang (/ Langli): A single-edged executioner's blade forged by the best craftsman in Qidong.

The second and youngest son of lawful birth to Xiao Fangxu, the Prince of Libei. Sometimes called Xiao Er, or Second Young Master Xiao.

QUDU

CEN YU : Courtesy name Xunyi. The Left Censor-in-Chief of the Chief Surveillance Bureau.

CHEN YANG (“MORNING SUN”): Leader of Xiao Chiye’s guards.

CHEN ZHEN : Minister of War.

COMMANDERY PRINCESS ZHAOYUE : Daughter of the Helian Marquis, Fei Shi’s older sister.

DING TAO (“PEACH”): Young guard to Xiao Chiye. He carries a little notebook everywhere he goes.

FEI SHENG (“FLOURISHING”): Son of common birth in the Fei Clan. An assistant commander in the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

FEI SHI : Lawful son of Fei Kun, the Helian Marquis.

FENGQUAN : A junior eunuch, Pan Rugui’s “grand-godson” and Mu Ru’s younger brother. Promoted to Director of the Seal at the Directorate of Ceremonial Affairs.

FU LINYE : The Right Censor-in-Chief of the Chief Surveillance Bureau.

FUMAN : A eunuch of the inner palace.

GE QINGQING : Judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard who served under Ji Gang when the latter was still the vice commander.

GU JIN : Guard to Xiao Chiye. He has excellent hearing.

HAI LIANGYI (“VIRTUOUS AND PROPER”): Courtesy name Renshi. Deputy Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat and teacher to Yao Wenyu.

HAN CHENG : Chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard after Ji Lei’s death.

HAN JIN : Military Commissioner of the Eight Great Battalions.

HUA HEWEI : The empress dowager, widow of the Guangcheng Emperor.

HUA XIANGYI (“RIPPLES OF FRAGRANCE”): The third lady of the Hua Clan, adored niece of the empress dowager. Betrothed to Qi Shiyu.

JI GANG : Shen Zechuan’s shifu. Once the vice commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he is one of the three adopted sons of Ji Wufan, the former chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

KONG QIU : Courtesy name Boran. Minister of Justice.

LI JIANHENG : The Tianchen Emperor. As the final survivor of the Li Clan, he ascended the throne after the death of the Xiande Emperor.

LI JIANTING (“SWORD; THUNDER”): Originally named Ling Ting (“clever; pretty”). After the passing of the Tianchen Emperor, she is brought forward as the imperial heir to the throne.

LI JIANYUN : The Xiande Emperor. Son of the Guangcheng Emperor and elder brother to Li Jianheng.

LIANG CUISHAN : A clerk in the Ministry of Revenue. After his audits of the Imperial Army’s accounts, he received a series of promotions that led him to work directly under Pan Lin.

MU RU : Imperial Concubine Mu. The daughter of a common family and sister to Fengquan. Adored by Li Jianheng, she was officially appointed as an imperial concubine after his ascension.

PAN LIN : Courtesy name Chengzhi. Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue and lawful son of Pan Xiangjie.

PAN XIANGJIE : Minister of Works. Head of the Pan Clan of the Eight Great Clans.

QI HUILIAN : Grand mentor to the deceased Crown Prince of Yongyi, and later, Shen Zechuan’s teacher.

QIAO TIANYA : Previously named Qiao Songyue. The former judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he now takes Shen Zechuan as his master.

TANTAI HU (“TIGER”): Member of the Imperial Army.

WEI HUAIGU : Minister of Revenue.

WEI HUAIXING : Vice Minister of the Court of Judicial Review.

XI DAN : Steward of the Xi Clan.

XI HONGXUAN : Secretary of the Bureau of Evaluations in the Ministry of Personnel. Xi Gu'an's brother and the second son of lawful birth in the Xi Clan.

XUE XIUYI : Xue Xiuzhuo's elder brother of lawful birth.

XUE XIUZHUO : Courtesy name Yanqing. Assistant Minister in the Court of Judicial Review. A capable young official and son of common birth in the Xue Clan.

YAO WENYU ("GENTLE JADE"): Courtesy name Yuanzhuo. Hai Liangyi's only acknowledged pupil, said to be an extraordinary talent.

YU XIAOZAI : Courtesy name Youjing. Investigating Censor in the Chief Surveillance Bureau.

Juexi

JIANG QINGSHAN ("GREEN HILLS"): Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi.

YANG CHENG : Assistant Administration Commissioner of Juexi.

LIBEI

GUO WEILI : A general of the Libei Armored Cavalry under the command of Xiao Jiming. He commands Base Camp.

LU YIZHI : Heir Consort of Libei. Xiao Jiming's wife and Lu Guangbai's sister.

WU ZIYU : The youngest general among the current generals of Libei. He leads a supply squadron.

XIAO FANGXU ("RISING SUN"): Prince of Libei. Father to Xiao Chiye and Xiao Jiming, and one of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou.

XIAO JIMING ("APPROACHING BRIGHTNESS"): Heir of Libei and commander of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Xiao Chiye's elder brother; he is

married to Lu Yizhi, Lu Guangbai's sister. One of the current Four Great Generals, he's known as "Iron Horse on River Ice."

XIAO XUN : Grandson-Heir of Libei. Lawful son of Xiao Jiming and Lu Yizhi.

ZHAO HUI ("MORNING SUN"): Xiao Jiming's dependable deputy general.

ZUO QIANQIU : Xiao Chiye's shifu and one of the current Four Great Generals, he's known as "Thunder on Jade Terraces."

QIDONG

LU GUANGBAI ("EMPTY EXPANSE"): Commanding general of the Bianjun Commandery in Qidong. Brother to Lu Yizhi and one of the current Four Great Generals, known as "Beacon-Smoke and Rising Sand."

LU PINGYAN ("PACIFY BEACON SMOKE"): Lu Guangbai's father and one of the past Four Great Generals of the Zhou empire.

QI SHIYU ("TIMELY RAIN"): Qi Zhuyin's father and one of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou.

QI ZHUYIN ("sound of bamboo"): Grand marshal of the Qidong Garrison Troops. One of the current Four Great Generals, Qi Zhuyin is known as "Windstorm through the Scorching Plains" and commands all five garrisons in the commanderies of Qidong.

ZHONGBO

CAI YU : A bandit in Chazhou whom Luo Mu, the prefect of Chazhou, relies on for backing.

KONG LING : Courtesy name Chengfeng. Chief advisor to Zhou Gui, prefect of Cizhou.

LEI CHANGMING : A bandit chief in Zhongbo. His base is Mount Luo.

LEI JINGZHE : A bandit of Mount Luo. The eldest common son of Lei Changming's sister and Zhu Jie, the commander of the Duanzhou Garrison Troops during the reign of Yongyi.

LI XIONG ("BEAR"): A youth who was taken in and raised by Lei Jingzhe.

LUO MU : Courtesy name Mengzheng. The prefect of Chazhou. He and Kong Ling were students together.

YAN HERU : The young master and current head of the Yan Clan of Hezhou. Lei Changming saved him when he was a child.

ZHOU GUI : Prefect of Cizhou.

BIANSHA

AMUR : From the Liaoying Tribe. He emerged as a Great Esuhuri and unified four of the twelve tribes of Biansha.

HUHELU : From the Changjiu Tribe. Amur's adopted son and a capable general.

BAYIM : Huhelu's deputy general.

PAST

BAI CHa ("WHITE TEA"): Shen Zechuan's mother. A dancer from Duanzhou.

FENG YISHENG : One of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou. Adopted father to Zuo Qianqiu.

HUA PINGTING : Wife of Ji Gang and mother of Ji Mu; Shen Zechuan's shiniang. She was born in the Hua Clan.

JI MU : The only son of Ji Gang and Hua Pingting, and Shen Zechuan's adoptive elder brother.

SHEN WEI ("DEFENSE"): Prince of Jianxing and Shen Zechuan's father. Found guilty of colluding with the Biansha Horsemen to invade

Zhongbo, he allegedly self-immolated to evade justice.

Institutions

THE EMBROIDERED UNIFORM GUARD

The Embroidered Uniform Guard, sometimes referred to as the Scarlet Cavalry, are the elite bodyguards who report directly to the emperor. They are a non-military secret police and investigative force. The Embroidered Uniform Guard is organized into the Twelve Offices, which include the Carriage Office, Umbrella Office, Elephant-Training Office, and Horse-Training Office, among others. The Xiuchun saber, a single-edged blade, is their signature weapon.

THE IMPERIAL ARMY

The Imperial Army of Qudu was once the Imperial Guard of the eight cities and the impregnable fortress of the imperial palace in Qudu. However, with the rise to power of the Eight Great Battalions, their duties were reduced significantly, and the Imperial Army became a dumping ground for sons from old military households. They are one of the two major military powers in Qudu.

THE EIGHT GREAT BATTALIONS

Led by a member of the Eight Great Clans, the Eight Great Battalions are one of the two major military powers in Qudu, tasked with patrolling and defending Qudu against external forces. Responsible for defending Qudu, the capital city and heart of the Zhou empire, the Eight Great Battalions hold the empire’s life in their hands.

THE EIGHT GREAT CLANS

The Eight Great Clans originated from the Eight Cities of Qudu. One clan holds sway in each city—the Xue Clan of Quancheng, Pan Clan of Dancheng, Xi Clan of Chuncheng, Fei Clan of Chuancheng, Hua Clan of Dicheng, Yao Clan of Jincheng, Han Clan of Wucheng, and Wei Clan of Cuocheng.

THE GRAND SECRETARIAT

The most distinguished and influential body in the central government, it is staffed with Grand Secretaries who are responsible for handling the emperor's paperwork, recommending decisions in response to memorials received from the officials, and drafting and issuing imperial pronouncements.

THE SIX MINISTRIES

The Six Ministries comprise the primary administrative structure of the Zhou empire's central government and include the Ministry of Works, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Personnel, Ministry of Rites, Ministry of Revenue, and Ministry of War. Coordinated by the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat, the heads of these ministries report directly to the emperor.

The Six Offices of Scrutiny is an independent agency set up to inspect and supervise the Six Ministries. It includes the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue.

CHIEF SURVEILLANCE BUREAU

Also known as the Censorate. One of the major agencies of the central government, responsible for maintaining disciplinary surveillance, auditing fiscal accounts, checking judicial records, carrying out inspections, impeaching officials for misconduct, recommending new policies and changes in old policies, and other duties involved in regulating government actions.

THE COURT OF JUDICIAL REVIEW

An important central government agency responsible for reviewing reports of judicial proceedings, making recommendations for retrials, and participating in important judicial proceedings at court alongside the Chief Surveillance Bureau and the Ministry of Justice, which are collectively known as the Three Judicial Offices.

THE LIBEI ARMORED CAVALRY

The Libei Armored Cavalry is a heavy cavalry established by Xiao Fangxu to counter external foes at the northern front during the Yongyi era, when the Biansha Horsemen repeatedly assaulted Luoxia Pass. Currently commanded by Xiao Jiming, the Heir of Libei.

THE QIDONG GARRISON TROOPS

Under the command of Qi Zhuyin, the Qidong Commandery Garrison Troops are stationed across five commanderies. They watch over the Qidong territories in the southern regions of the Zhou empire, which are led by the Qi Clan.

THE BIANSHA HORSEMEN

The Biansha Horsemen are the aggressor forces against the empire of Zhou. The story begins with the aftermath of the war, where the Biansha Horsemen ravaged the six prefectures of Zhongbo and left them piled high with bodies. Also referred to in derogatory form as the “Biansha baldies.”

THE TWENTY-FOUR YAMEN

Collectively refers to the Twelve Directorates, Four Offices, and Eight Services under which eunuchs serve.

Names Guide

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

COURTESY NAMES VS GIVEN NAMES

Usually made up of two characters, a courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Though generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their given name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one's given name was reserved only for elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in historically inspired media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

DIMINUTIVES, NICKNAMES, AND NAME TAGS

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

XIAO-: A diminutive prefix meaning "little."

-ER: An affectionate diminutive suffix added to names, literally "son" or "child." Not to be confused with Xiao Chiye's nickname, Xiao Er, in which "er" ( ) means "second."

-LANG: A suffix meaning young man. A term of address often used toward one's lover or husband.

LAO-: A diminutive prefix meaning "old."

-ZI: Affectionate suffix meaning "son" or "child."

-**XIONG:** A word meaning elder brother. It can be attached as a suffix to address an older male peer.

FAMILY

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE/DAGE: Older brother or an older male friend.

JIE/JIEJIE: Older sister or an older female friend.

-**SHU:** A suffix meaning “uncle.” Can be used to address unrelated older men.

MARTIAL ARTS AND TUTELAGE

SHIFU: Teacher or master, usually used when referring to the martial arts.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SHISHU: Martial uncle, used to address someone who studied under the same master (or shifu) as one’s own master.

SHINIANG: The wife of one’s shifu.

XIANSHENG: Teacher of academics.

OTHER

GONGZI: Young man from an affluent household.

-**NIANGNIANG:** Term of address for the empress or an imperial concubine, can be standalone or attached to a name as a suffix.

-**GONGGONG:** Term of address for a eunuch.

SHIZI: Title for the heir apparent of a feudal prince.

LAO-ZUZONG: Literally “old ancestor,” an intimate and respectful term of address from a junior eunuch to a more senior eunuch.

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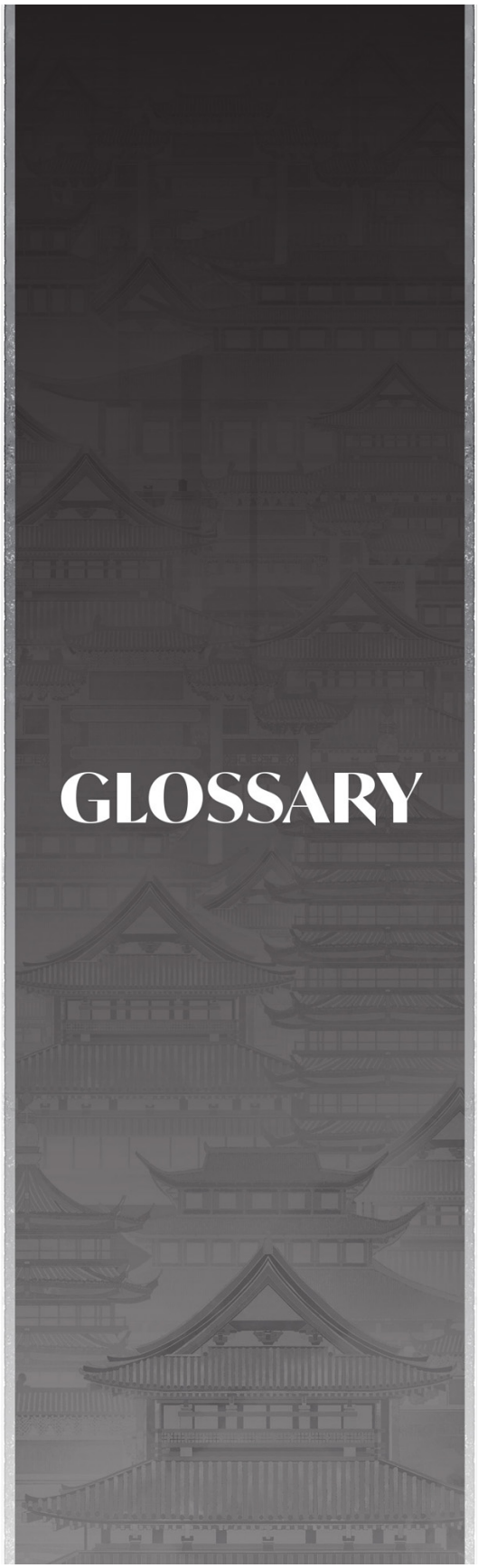
GLOSSARY

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Glossary

CONCUBINES AND THE IMPERIAL HAREM: In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to take women as concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status; hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have tens or even a hundred.

The imperial harem had its own ranking system. The exact details vary over the course of history, but can generally be divided into three overarching ranks: the empress, consorts, and concubines. The status of a prince or princess's mother is an important factor in their status in the imperial family, in addition to birth order and their own personal merits. Given the patrilineal rules of succession, the birth of a son could also elevate the mother's status.

IMPERIAL EXAMINATION SYSTEM: The system of examinations in ancient China that qualified someone for official service. It was intended to be a meritocratic system that allowed common civilians to rise up in society as a countering force to the nobility, but the extent to which this was true varied across time.

The imperial examination system was split into various levels. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, these were the provincial exam, metropolitan exam, and the palace exam. The top scholars at each examination level were known as the Jieyuan, Huiyuan, and Zhuangyuan respectively, and a scholar who emerged top at all three levels was known as the Sanyuan, or Triple Yuan, scholar.

LAWFUL AND COMMON BIRTH HIERARCHY: Upper-class men in ancient China often took multiple wives. Only one would be the official wife, and her lawful sons would take precedence over the common sons of the concubines. Sons of lawful birth were prioritized in matters of inheritance.

They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the other common sons born to concubines or mistresses.

OFFICIALS: Civil and military officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank. Referral by someone in a position of power, such as a noble, a eunuch, or another official, was the traditional path to becoming a court official. Another path, which later gained popularity as a way of combatting corruption and political cliques, was going through the imperial examination.

OFFICIALS OF COMMON BACKGROUNDS: Despite coming from affluent, possibly landowning, families, these officials were said to be from "common backgrounds" because they were the first court officials in their family. This is in direct contrast to the noble officials, who consolidated their power over time by forming a familial network with other officials and using their influence to raise their younger generations to officialdom.

UNITS OF MEASUREMENT:

li **( )**: A traditional unit of length equal to approximately 500 meters or 1,640 feet.

chi **( )**: A traditional unit of length equal to approximately 13 inches.

dan **( )**: A dry measure for grain equal to approximately 100 liters.

dou **( )**: A dry measure for grain equal to one-tenth of a dan.

YAMEN: An administrative office or department, or residence of a government official. For example, that of a local district magistrate or prefectural prefect. This is not the same as the Twenty-Four Yamen run by the eunuchs.

YELLOW REGISTER: In the Ming and Qing dynasties, households were classified and recorded into the Huangce ( ) or yellow registers according to their occupations, which remained unchanged from one generation to the next. These records provided information for taxation, as well as corvée and military conscription. Households were mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and trades, with civilians further divided into subcategories like scholars, farmers, or builders. Apart from the “good civilians” or , there also existed a permanent underclass of slaves or , who were born into their class or relegated as punishment for crime.

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About the Author

Tang Jiu Qing is an internationally renowned author who writes for the novel serialization website JJWXC. She started the web serialization of *Ballad of Sword and Wine: Qiang Jin Jiu*, in 2018. Her published works include *Nan Chan* and *Time Limited Hunt*, among others.

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Footnotes

Chapter 113: Reunion

[1] dan, a volumetric measure for grain approximately equal to one hundred liters. One dan is made up of ten dou.

[2] dou, a volumetric measure for grain approximately equal to ten liters.

Chapter 131: A Spider's Web

[3] From the poem "Spring Rain," by Du Fu, a distinguished poet of the Tang Dynasty considered a genius of the form. In Tang Poetry, spring rain is seen as crucial for germination in the sowing season, working quietly, almost unnoticed.

Chapter 135: Earring

[4] Laozi, a Chinese philosopher considered the founder of Daoism, and author of the classic Tao Te Ching.

Chapter 136: Sowing Discord

[5] Like Xiao Chiye's nickname of "Xiao Er," this moniker suggest that Fei Sheng is the tenth son in his family.

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OPENING GAMBIT

Having successfully foiled the bandit attack on the city of Cizhou in Zhongbo, Xiao Chiye sets off in pursuit of their leader, attempting to cut him off before he returns to his lair. At the same time, having gained control of Cizhou, Shen Zechuan sets his sights on the neighboring prefecture of Chazhou in hopes of brokering a trade agreement. But Chazhou is a lawless place, ruled by a ruthless bandit chief who has long neglected the starving populace. If Shen Zechuan wishes to make his mark here, he must rely not on any army, but his own cunning.

As Shen Zechuan fights for a foothold in Zhongbo, a new power is rising in the capital of Qudu. Those with ambition eye the throne from all sides. The board is set for a game of wits that will decide the fate of a nation—and Shen Zechuan is playing to win.

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